

“He Told Me Everything I Have Ever Done”

Silence gives consent.

-Proverb of Law-

When the Evangelist declares, in the opening of the *Gospel of John*: “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . .and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*” [literally, “*pitched his tent among us*”], he ties Christianity to a narrative tradition in which salvation and story are inextricably linked. Catholic identity emerges not from a series of precepts and principles, not from dogmas or doctrines, not from the purity of the abstract word, but from the Word made flesh: from the story of Jesus Christ and his relationship with those first followers, and with each new believer. Jesus comes to us through his story, and enters the story of each person he encounters, helping that person to understand better their experience, to know the truth of who they are. Though the story of Jesus lacks the theological precision of the Catechism or the rigor of Canon Law, unless we enter that story, unless we listen to it in its many levels and dimensions, the teachings and the law have little human meaning: they are simply intellectual artifacts. Christianity demands story; it reverences story; it makes the remembrance of story the source by which Christ’s own body and blood becomes our food and drink. And because the story of Jesus is so much a part of the whole human story, Christianity imbues with infinite value all the messiness of our world: the life and the loss, the courage and the betrayal, the great evil of death and the resurrecting power of love. Far from the idealized principles of some traditions, Christian truth lives at the center of our own broken and blessed reality, at the center of human experience. There truth has “*pitched his tent among us,*” and there truth must be found and embraced—“*on earth as it is in heaven.*”

One of the best examples of the primacy of story and remembrance in Christianity comes in the fourth chapter of John’s gospel, when Jesus encounters the Samaritan Woman. Here, at the well of the patriarch, Jacob, Jesus and the Samaritan Woman begin by sparring with one another about social norms and theology, but quickly move into a discussion of her life story. Jesus listens to the Woman and helps her to listen to herself. He helps her to acknowledge her story, offering his attention and insight and receiving her honesty and truth as a kind of food that nourishes him—so much so that he is not hungry when the disciples return. Yet, what is most profound in this story is the proclamation that the Woman makes when she leaves Jesus and goes into the town—the first and only disciple in all of *John* to be missioned to preach about Jesus. Coming into the town, her message to the people is not about theology or social norms, not about Jacob nor about Jerusalem nor even about Jesus; rather, the good news that sparks her is: “*Come see a man who told me everything I have done.*” What, for many of us, might seem a terrifying prospect—to have someone tell us everything we have ever done—for the Samaritan Woman is the source of her faith; it is her liberation and her salvation. In helping her tell her story, in allowing her to hear and to face all she has ever done, Jesus enables the Samaritan Woman to find liberation from all of the pretense, all the illusions behind which most of us hide. He frees her from the fear of being found out. And, further, in helping her claim her sin and acknowledge all that she has ever done, Jesus then accepts her, and loves her, and honors

her in a way she feared would never happen. This is good news for her; this is a gospel of salvation and liberation. Jesus meets this Samaritan Woman, and consecrates her for his service not in spite of her failures and sins, but in the midst of them. Receiving her story and binding it to his own, he saves her in a way she might never have believed possible.

Today, in a crucial moment for the history of the Church, the example of the Samaritan Woman—whose healing comes only when she listens to the story of her life through the ministry of Christ, only when she lets herself hear *“everything I have ever done”*—is one to which we need to attend. For today, all those charged with leadership in the Church need to imitate the Samaritan Woman: listening to the story of the Church and facing everything that they have ever done.

Like the Samaritan Woman, the bishops and leaders in the Church need to go to the well of the patriarchs, to that place where the people worship God. There they need to acknowledge that they are thirsty for a kind of mercy which they, themselves, cannot provide. Like the Samaritan Woman, they need to accept that they have wed themselves to false spouses: to power and privilege, to wealth and status. And they need, then, to open their hearts to the One who speaks with the voice of Christ, to the body of Christ who can reveal to them *“everything [they] have ever done.”* In this historic moment, rather than taking their usual posture as *“alter Christi”* (*“other Christs”*), these men, who have been isolated by their own clerical rank, need to assume the posture of the Samaritan Woman, who thirsts for the living water that can only come through listening to Christ. In the voice of the faithful, they must discern their own story, and hear the great and painful truth that will allow them to go free. Not through passive-voiced apologies nor liturgies of reconciliation, but only through humbly listening to the stories of those wounded by abuse and cover-up in the Church can salvation come to those responsible for these abusive structures. For unless they listen, unless they allow the People of God to show them the whole story of the Church—not just its grandeur, but the pain and destruction it has sometimes caused—there cannot be genuine self-awareness or believable repentance.

It is by helping the Samaritan Woman know all she has ever done, that Jesus frees her from her denial and welcomes her into a place where mercy is possible. She becomes, by virtue of knowing the role of sin in her own story, capable of accepting the love and mercy—the living water—that Jesus has to offer. In hearing and accepting her own story, she is accepted by Christ, and so becomes a disciple, capable of proclaiming the good news that she has experienced herself. In a similar way, the bishops and clergy need to hear, and make their own, the stories of those who are the Church; they need to listen, as she listens, to the voice of Christ who tells them the fullness of their own story, including the painful and sinful parts. Only in this way can they, like the Samaritan Woman, enter the place of mercy and become, in truth, the ministers they are called to be.

No wound can be healed that is not first revealed, and those who have suffered by the sins of clerics—both the direct victims of abuse and the whole community of the faithful, harmed by the secrets of a clericalized Church—assume the part of Jesus at the well for us today. They come weary to the place, and yet become strong in helping us—who call ourselves the leaders of the Church—to know better our own story. Here, the People of God act *“in persona Christi”*—*“in the role of Christ”*—by revealing the wounds of the

Church not as abstractions nor as principles of law, but in their effects upon real persons, in the stories of the lives that have been harmed and the faith that has been broken. In this moment, the official “leaders” of the Church must accept with humility the position of listeners, of disciples confronted by “all [they] have ever done,” and not too quickly presume to retake their place as chosen ministers. Part of a systemic sin, rooted in clericalism, the hierarchy must begin to seek healing by following the example of the Samaritan Woman, i.e., by allowing the story of their sin and its effects to be told to them by those who feel it most deeply and know it with particular force. *This is why, before any rites of reconciliation, every parish and diocese, every community of faith, needs to engage in listening sessions, where the priests and bishops are not speakers of their own words, but receivers of the Word made flesh in the community of faith. Until that is done, until those immersed in clerical culture hear, more clearly, the truth of their story, all rites and liturgies will seem hollow, ungrounded in the reality of experience.*

If the analogy of the leadership of the Church and the Samaritan Woman is challenging, still it offers hope for the Church, as well—though not through any facile or instantaneous relief. The story of the Samaritan Woman is the story of one who accepts the cross of self-realization, which, paradoxically brings her to self-liberation. Only in this way does she become a true minister to her community, revealing the *Logos*, the *Word* that is Christ, to others—not by discourse or arguments—but by the experience she has had. Likewise, the Church (i.e., the whole People of God) needs to embrace the cross of our history if we are to be saved. Our ministry, i.e., our service of one another and the world, depends on our willingness to accept the revelations of our history and the failure of our choices. Or, to put it another way, it depends upon our willingness to name the “false spouses” we have so often embraced. In the current crisis, this means that the bishops, especially, must listen to the laity and to other victims of clerical privilege; but, it might also mean that white Catholics need to listen to Catholics of color who have been so often ignored, or that men in the Church (including clerics) must listen to women whose voice is so often silenced. While such listening must not become self-indulgent nor a form of masochistic self-flagellation—while it must be discerning and modeled on Christ—still, it must be seen as an essential step towards true reconciliation and redemption. When we allow ourselves to leave the roles and castes of privilege, accepting the humility of the Samaritan Woman, we become revealed, as she was, even to ourselves, even in our sin. And, more than that, we allow the other person to be revealed, as well: the One whose story we hear, the One who tells us the part of our story we have denied. Such deep listening gives us a kind of knowledge impossible to find simply through the testimony of others or in the summaries offered by statistics on abuse. It gives us direct knowledge of those against whom we have sinned, and so allows for the possibility of true repentance and real reconciliation.