

Marriage Story (or so we thought)

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Since any statutes of limitations should have expired by now, I'll risk confessing to you that we didn't own a television set when our kids were very young. At times we worried someone might report this neglect to Child Protective Services. But since we didn't have a TV, some kind soul had pity on our son Alden and gave him a broken remote control to add to the small collection of rocks and sticks his heartless parents had convinced him were actual toys.

Obviously, "remote control" has quite a few syllables for a toddler. So he referred to it as his "bokenontrol." As very proud and very typical first time parents, we thought the word both brilliant and cute, and so it made its way into the Walters family lexicon. And just now it occurs to me that it's amazing our kids learned to talk at all since we tended to prefer the words they made up to the real ones we were trying to teach them.

But for some reason, "bokenontrol" was a word that remained in usage long after the thing itself had been lost or chewed up by our yellow Labrador—the two fates of most of what we owned at the time. And by the time we had two kids who had reached prime storytelling ages, the word had morphed into a proper name: the Bokenon Troll.

The Bokenon Troll was no longer a channel changer. She was an actual troll—a kindly troll, mind you—who appeared suddenly one day in response to the intensifying demands for a story from the two, small, backseat Walters during a car trip. Negotiating with terrorists is dangerous, but I broke down and made up a story. And from then on the Bokenon Troll was the unlikely heroine of lots and lots of stories—stories that always seemed to involve two children getting themselves into some difficult situation, the difficulty of which was closely related to the length of our trip somehow. And without fail, just when all hope seemed to be lost, the Bokenon Troll would come to the kids' rescue—a rescue that almost always involved jet packs.

Young parents, if there's nothing else in this sermon to take away, at least consider this. If you include both happy trolls and jet packs in a story, you can fill the rest in with just about anything you like and it will be a success.

Well, if the great literary critic and Hebrew Bible scholar, Robert Alter, ever gets around to studying the body of my work, oral history included, I think he might call the arrival of the Bokenon Troll a type-scene. Some of the details might change, but we know essentially what's about to happen when she enters a story. Things will get better. There will be jet packs. Etc.

The type-scene stirs up our expectations in an interesting way. Even though we know basically what's coming, we don't check out. Our attention is actually focused even more closely on the details. We may know where this is going, but how will the familiar storyline play out this time? In the Bible, when a woman and a man meet at a well, it's a first rate type-scene. And do you know what almost always happens when they do? They don't ride off on jet packs. They get married.

Back in Genesis 24, Abraham is advanced in years when he sends his servant off to find a wife for his son Isaac. The servant ends up at a well, where all the daughters of the townspeople were coming to draw water. He's hit the matchmaker's jackpot. So, he prays that he'll know which girl is the right one when she offers not only water for him, but for his camel also. And Rebekah walks up and does just that.

Isaac and Rebekah, you might remember, will indeed get married, and one of their sons will be named Jacob. And a few chapters later, Jacob will meet Rachel, you guessed it, at a well, and will fall hard for her. There are complications...a tricky uncle/father-in-law to be, drunkenness, an accidental marriage to her older sister and all that... But these are fresh new details that sparkle only more brightly on a story we

already know. We knew Jacob and Rebekah would marry from the moment she arrived at the well with her sheep. The fun is in the particular twists and turns in this leg of a road that always ends at a wedding.

There are others. Like Moses and Zipporah. These are not exactly minor Old Testament characters, you see. But the point here is that when Jesus meets a woman at a well, all kinds of type-scene warning lights would be flashing for a reader of the Hebrew scriptures. We know what happens when a prophet meets a woman at a well. They marry. They have children.

And more importantly, this is how the story of God's chosen people continues. This is how the promise that Abraham's offspring will be countless as the stars gets fulfilled, one generation at a time. In the end, wells aren't about love. They're about offspring, so that Abraham's line, and God's covenant with Israel, will live on. Eternal life is a never-ending line of progeny. So, in John chapter four, the old type-scene announces to us what to expect. We know what happens when a prophet like Jesus meets a woman at *Jacob's well*, of all places. But, spoiler alert. Somehow the inevitable doesn't happen this time. Jesus doesn't marry the girl. The type-scene gets broken. Or broken open, perhaps.

Jesus does not marry the Samaritan woman so that his line is sure to continue. He engages her as someone worthy of his full attention in and of herself and he sees her for who she is. And, even more incredibly, she doesn't recoil or apologize or deflect. She stands up straight and she listens to him, questions him, tells him what she thinks.

Commentators note that Jesus is simply making an observation, rather than a judgment, when he tells her the truth about her marital history, and that divorce is not the only possible explanation of her five previous husbands. But here we are again, friends, at a well, in the Bible, and the topic of conversation is... wait for it... marriage.

But what happens as the story continues is all wrong. Rather than being absorbed into the family line of Jesus, a whole, dignified, curious person takes shape before our eyes in the body of one who is not supposed to be any of those things. The Samaritan woman is amazed by what Jesus knows about her. But it is equally amazing that she seems to engage him almost as an equal, pressing him to understand the rearrangement of another story that she, along with the rest of us, thought we knew.

He's saying that maybe it won't matter what temple you worship in or who your ancestors are any more. Which means it may not matter who you're married to either. The miracle is no longer that all these suitable wives have been found at all those wells for the patriarchs so that Abraham's lineage can unfurl off toward forever. The miracle is that God might just meet this woman where she is, as who she is. This woman who's had plenty of husbands but somehow doesn't need any of them to be whole. Not now.

I wish I had a mustard seed of the faith of that brave Samaritan woman. Because Jesus was dismantling the story that told her who she was. It told her who her people were and who they weren't and what God thought of them. It told her how and where to worship and why that mattered. But she stayed present to him and listened, not under cover of night as Nicodemus did a chapter before. And he was an important religious leader with all kinds of authority she couldn't have dreamed of having. But she—a heretical foreigner in the eyes of Jesus's people and a woman to boot—she stood there and listened in the bright light of noonday, we're told. And somehow, she kept whole, even as Jesus told her that the structures and stories that had defined her all of her life were all falling down.

Perhaps in frightening times like the ones we're living through right now, when things we thought were sure seem to be falling down around us, what we're left with, like that woman at the well, is the truth about ourselves. A truth that's actually more enduring than temples and bloodlines and nations. A truth that's absolutely more enduring than plagues or pandemics. Because the truth about us is that God found and finds each of us of infinitely more worth than the structures and systems that can seem more real or more significant than a single, small human life like yours, or like mine, or like that of the minimum wage clerk at a suddenly empty store, or of the child who still believes all stories end in happily ever afters.

So, maybe if love of neighbor this Lent requires the strange new practice of "social distancing" and the avoidance of crowds, we will find time and space in our lives to be present to one unlikely person at a time who is worthy to be seen but usually isn't. Maybe someone overlooked or unheard. But maybe someone Jesus would have gladly been caught in the act of talking to, seeing truthfully, bringing to life. Someone who might even turn from the encounter and head back into her Samaria to do the same.