

# Revival out of helplessness

By Rolanda Taylor and Yvonne Terry

The story of the Samaritan woman at the well can help us reflect on racism.

## INTRODUCTION

In October, we attended a gathering of The Black Clergy of The United Church of Canada at the Providence Renewal Centre in Edmonton, Alta. It was followed by a symposium sponsored by Alberta and Northwest Conference. The topic of the symposium was “An Awkward Conversation in the Church” with guest speaker Dr. Anthony Reddie. Reddie, a leading scholar in Black Theology, touched on colour-blind racism. For example, when someone comments to a Black person, “I do not see colour,” it implies this person is invisible. Reddie stated that unless we discuss colour-blind racism, we do not call each other out on the truth of its existence. If we do not continue the awkward conversation, it will always exist. In this Bible study, let us begin the dialogue.

## OPENING HYMN

Sing *More Voices* #169, “When Hands Reach Out Beyond Divides”

## SCRIPTURE

The Gospel of John 4:5–42

## PRAYER OF PREPARATION

**God, in your presence, we humble ourselves before you. Help us as we seek through this Bible study to understand more your mission for the church through us.**

**Jesus recognized the face of the Samaritan woman when he reached out to her for water. From that recognition, he gave her Living Water that revived her.**

**Show us that no matter our helpless state, you reach out to us, and we, in turn, reach out to each other and**

**point out injustices in our churches, communities, and the world.**

**We open our hearts and minds to you. Fill us with your Living Water, making us all worthy of your love and acceptance. Amen.**

## BACKGROUND HISTORY

The conflict and hostility between the Samaritans and the Jewish people began when the Assyrians had conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel (Samaria), and some Israelites were exiled in Medes (2 Kings 17:6). The remainder of the Israelites in Samaria intermarried with foreigners who were also conquered by the Assyrians, and they kept some traditions of Judaism. The Southern Israelites (Judah) were conquered by Babylonians, and they were exiled in Babylon. Years later, the Southern Israelites were deported from Babylon. They returned to a Jerusalem that was in ruins, and they were faced with rebuilding. The rift between the Jewish people and the Samaritans was evident. To the Jewish people, the Samaritans were an offence against God because of their intermarriages, and they were no longer considered Jews according to the Law of Moses.

## REFLECTION

The story about the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well is significant because it is only featured in the Gospel of John. The woman, who is unnamed, had been subjected to repression due to being a Samaritan. Her repression made her helpless, which led to her being marginalized, unacknowledged, and silenced for her heritage and gender identity. However, when Jesus

as a Jewish man reached out to her, it meant that he was accepting her as a woman, as a Samaritan, and as a person with flaws because she had five husbands and the one who was with her was not her husband (verse 18).

The story of the Samaritan woman can be used to reflect on racism. When racism permeates a person, it festers and can build walls between that person and society. The person facing racism can become helpless. Helplessness gnaws away at the inner core of a person’s heart, soul, and being when the person cannot express himself or herself because of fear or when the person is not acknowledged as a human being and equal to others in the sight of God. All these could lead that person to become a prisoner of the self.

The term “minority” makes a person’s worth less. The term is dehumanizing. It does not recognize people for their value as persons with the same rights, dignity, and respect as their counterparts in society. More often, “minorities” are not acknowledged for the contributions they make. They are often silenced by being ignored when they make contributions to discussions. They feel the pain of rejection and become frustrated by the helplessness. They may even ask, “Why are we marginalized? What have we done?” In this helpless state, people who are faced with prejudice cannot easily see a revival of their commitment to God through Christ in their future.

It is hard for us to acknowledge each other’s song; the song is who we are as children of God. The Samaritan woman looked beyond her oppressive situation and called out Jesus on his

Jewish belief. She reminded him that we are all children of the one true God; therefore, we are entitled to the same treatment and opportunities.

In telling of the Samaritan woman, John showed his community that Jesus broke down barriers between people of different nationalities, that Jewish and Samaritan Jews would worship God in the same Spirit of God. Recently, I have been reading the book *Loving Yourself as Your Neighbour* by Mark Lloyd Taylor and Carmen Renee Berry (Harper and Row, 1990). The book refers to the prodigal son shown in Luke 15:11–32. His return home was received with unconditional love in the form of a warm embrace by his father. As I thought of this story, I reflected on the Samaritan woman whose mixed background was seen by the Jews as dishonourable and whose

lifestyle was seen as a disgrace. Yet she was embraced with Living Water that was the unconditional love of God. In both cases, God saw the value in each person and acknowledged them as children of God. So why do we condemn each other openly and subtly based on the colour of our skin, when God sees our worth?

### GROUP DISCUSSION

Ask those in the room who identify with a certain race to stand. When everyone is standing, then make the statement, “All who belong to the human race sit down.” This is to demonstrate that there is only one race.

When we say people are of different races, prejudice begins. The story of the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well lets us ask the following questions:

- How is the unnamed woman

experiencing helplessness?

- What do people of different ethnic backgrounds experience in life that would lead them to being helpless?
- Name some injustices toward people of various ethnicities. How do you respond to these injustices? Do you call out people who show prejudice, or are you silent observers?
- What does “Living Water” mean for the Samaritan woman? How can we give Living Water to people of different ethnicities?

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