

# What Is Reconciliation? Quenching Our Thirst

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**Romans 5:1-11 and John 4:1-15**

A quick trip to Ohio for a college break pick-up is always enjoyable, especially in winter as we play a fun game called “Surviving Erie.” But there are other benefits. I take the time always to listen to the radio, to get out of my NPR, sports talk routine and hear what’s popular. The pattern is if I hear something in Buffalo, I will hear it several times across Pennsylvania, then into Ashtabula, Ohio and south through Cleveland. By the time I head home I have it memorized, whether I want to or not. So it is with a song by Alessia Cara, called “Scars to Your Beautiful.”

It begins this way:

“She just wants to be beautiful  
She goes unnoticed, she knows no limits,  
She craves attention, she praises an image,  
She prays to be sculpted by the sculptor  
Oh she don't see the light that's shining  
Deeper than the eyes can find it  
Maybe we have made her blind  
So she tries to cover up her pain, and cut her woes away  
'Cause covergirls don't cry after their face is made...”

It can sound like typical teenage angst, and perhaps it is. But the more I listened to it, through Hamburg, New York and Presque Isle, Pennsylvania and Conneaut, Ohio, the more I wasn’t so sure. A good pop song – and there are some -- invites you in. Teenage girl. Unnoticed. Teenage boy. Transgendered youth. Adults. Those who aren’t sure of themselves because of the way they look. Those who aren’t sure of themselves because of how they feel. Those who don’t fit in. Those who struggle on many levels, inside and outside. Those who are addicted. Those who are depressed. Those who seemingly don’t struggle but live with the sense that it’s all a façade. Those who have been kept down because of lack of privilege,

and those who have perpetrated privilege and know they must change. Those who, for whatever reason, physical or emotional or relational or even spiritual, are unnoticed, who can't see the light that's shining, who experience pain. Any of us. All of us.

Here's the chorus:

"But there's a hope that's waiting for you in the dark  
You should know you're beautiful just the way you are  
And you don't have to change a thing  
The world could change its heart  
No scars to your beautiful, we're stars and we're beautiful..."

"You're beautiful just the way you are...No scars to your beautiful."

We do not know her name, though she commands considerable real estate in John's gospel. Jesus is in the Samaritan city called Sychar. He has been traveling with his disciples. It is noon, and warm, and he is thirsty. He encounters a woman, a Samaritan woman. He asks her for a drink. Actually, he doesn't really ask; he demands. This morning we've heard a part of this story, but I will fill in what follows.

"Give me a drink," Jesus says. Already the encounter is notable. Jesus, a Jewish male, would not speak with a Samaritan woman. She knows this, as does he. Yet they speak with one another, a kind of verbal dance at many levels, about water and so much more than water. Jesus is physically thirsty; what we learn is that the Samaritan woman is thirsty at a much deeper level. In what we just heard, she finally begins to understand who Jesus is, and she asks him for the living water that he offers, so that she will never be thirsty again.

Our passage ends, but the story continues. They spar on her marital status. She has had several husbands, or at least male relationships, and the man with whom she is relating now is not her husband. You can read this little section many ways. Some in the history of interpretation have said the implication is that this woman is a prostitute, or at least someone with a morally ambiguous reality. When I read the story without that filter, I see Jesus simply identifying her status, not to judge, but to establish that he knows her, knows her story, her circumstance, her narrative. He knows, and she knows that he knows, so that this Samaritan woman

connects with this Jewish man on an entirely different plane. She finally realizes that this Jesus is the Messiah.

Then the disciples show up, and are baffled by it all, as the disciples so often are. The woman goes back to the city and becomes an instant evangelist, telling her people of the encounter and telling them what this Jesus did and who he is. We are told later that “many believed” because of what she did, what she said, that she was willing to share her experience.

What I am not is a psychologist, among many other things.

- Yet I can't help but ponder what is going on here, the immediacy of the encounter but also its rippling and far-reaching implications.
- I can't help but reflect in a week when we've marked International Woman's Day.
- I can't help but wonder in a week when we've been asked anew to think about places of origin, and crossing borders.
- I can't help but wonder in this Year of Reconciliation.
- I can't help but wonder as a pop song about living life unnoticed goes through my head.
- I can't help but wonder as public thinkers like Brene Brown, who many of us know through her books and Ted talks, curate conversations that merit our attention about themes like sadness and fear and desperation and panic and heartbreak and shame. In her book called *Rising Strong*, which some of you have read, Brown writes about the “death of our expectations” and how painful that can be, “painful beyond measure.”

So I am not a psychologist, but what I do believe, and know, is that many of us, perhaps all of us, walk around with internal and external wounds. Some are self-inflicted. Some are inflicted by others. Some are inflicted by culture. All of them prevent us from claiming not only the pop song's affirmation, that we are beautiful, that we have no scars, but that we are beloved by God, created in God's image.

I have quoted extensively from the theologian Paul Tillich's famous sermon from the last century, “You Are Accepted.” I thought about Tillich as I thought about all those moments in my life, and perhaps yours, when you felt all of the feelings on the table, and were therefore unable to believe that you were beautiful, inside or outside or both.

Why I say that I am no psychologist is that I do not want to project all of this onto the Samaritan woman, but I can only believe that a foreign woman, a second class citizen by definition, with a back-story, has not experienced or felt one of those feelings, that despite whatever inner resilience she has, has not been left out, diminished in some way.

And Jesus stops and talks with her, and takes her seriously. He accepts her, as she is.

Tillich writes: "Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage."

That may not be her, or us; but it may be. Tillich continues: "Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!' If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement."

Here is what I believe. I believe that in order to do the good and hard work of reconciliation in the world, in your relationships, in our culture, you first must claim reconciliation in your own heart, in your own soul. It is an old adage to say that in order to love others, you must love yourself. But in order to do that, you must accept yourself.

You must embrace this self-reconciliation. It is grace. It is a gift. It is offered to us, regardless of our autobiography, regardless of how culture treats us or labels us,

regardless of how we feel about ourselves, regardless of how others feel about us.

I believe that when we meet Jesus at the well, and we do, he will look us in the eye and know our hearts, and he will accept us, simply accept us. And we will serve him by giving him a drink, just as we will serve others by doing the same.

But we cannot quench his thirst or any other unless and until the deep thirst of our souls is quenched. And just as it happened, it happens. We rise strong. We know that we are beautiful, no scars. We accept that we are accepted. We are thirsty no more. Amen.