

Dignity in Cross-Cultural Relationships:

An Anabaptist Approach to Short-Term Missions

ROBERT THIESSEN¹

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in Sychar, told in the fourth chapter of John, has ramifications for many areas of ministry. In this article I will examine the many ways this story can help us shape what we often call "short-term missions." Jesus' life and teachings serve for Anabaptists as the prism through which we view all Scripture, and how Jesus approaches this particular "short term" ministry is key.²

Jesus arrives at midday in the Samaritan lady's town after walking for hours with his disciples. While they go into town to find food, Jesus sits down to wait beside the well — one supposedly dug by Jacob over a millennium before. He is hungry, tired, and thirsty. Along comes a woman, alone, and (we assume) outcast, to draw water. Jesus, needing her help, asks for water. Something begins to take place that moves this woman to share her discovery of living water with the very townspeople who had ostracized her.

This story, at its heart, is about human dignity. Over and over Jesus shows how much he values and dignifies individuals, but never more than here. From the outset we notice Jesus' condition — he is decidedly in a position of need, and with nothing to offer. He is "the very likeness of God," and yet he cannot even get a pot of water for himself! He is alone (at least for this moment) and starts the conversation by asking the woman for something she can give. How different from the way many short-term missionaries operate!

Although we know little about this woman's life, we can make some guess-

1 *Written January 2014 by Robert Thiessen of southern Ontario, Canada. Robert lives with his wife, Anne, and two children (Ruth and Philip), among Mixtec indigenous people in the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca, Mexico. He serves with MBMission, Abbotsford, BC, Canada (North American Mennonite Brethren Church), and is also associated with Moravians in North Carolina, and the Unity of the Brethren in Texas.*

2 Jacob Loewen: "[R]adical reformers insisted on a 'focused' view of the canon . . . a powerful exegetical principle. It defined not only the core value of Scripture — Jesus' life and teaching — but by giving equal rank to teaching and life it postulated that word and deed are inseparable dimensions of faith. Furthermore, Jesus' teaching and life functioned as a prism through which all scriptural truth was to be filtered for interpretation." Jacob Loewen, *Only the Sword of the Spirit* (Kindred Productions, 1997), 207.

es, since she arrives at midday without female companions, and she has “had five husbands.” I have asked dozens of groups to act this story out, and inevitably, probably because of this detail, they choose a young “sexy” girl to play her part. They think of her as something akin to a prostitute. But after living twenty years among a marginalized indigenous group in southern Mexico, I see this woman differently. Now I imagine her as one of the Mixtec women I have known — married off by an emotionally distant father at thirteen, abandoned by her husband after having two children, and now taking up with new partners who can put corn in the pot. With each new partner (and child), she becomes less marriageable. She might be only thirty-five, but she looks worn and used up, aged far beyond her years. Other women around her, lucky enough to miss a similar story, shun her as a threat to their own marriages, a bearer of bad karma. She has lived a “hell on earth,” sinking deeper into despair at each turn of the wheel.

The woman is unexpectedly asked by this Jewish rabbi to give him water, and begins to get a hint that her world is going to be turned on its head. Initially this is so out of her experience that she becomes defensive. After all, who has ever treated her with respect? She barely knows what that means. As the encounter unfolds, Jesus touches on her marriage situation, and she, adept at wiggling away from uncomfortable issues, asks a question she hopes will focus his attention elsewhere, a theological question that gets to the heart of the divide between Jew and Samaritan.

Jesus’ answer is so powerful that to this day many people memorize these few verses (21–4) but remain ignorant of the overall context. He says (my paraphrase), “It doesn’t matter where you’ve come from, what ethnic background; now is the time to worship God in spirit and in truth, in ways that no longer divide, but unite.” This is even more shattering when we consider Jesus’ purpose in life. Paul calls this purpose “the secret and mystery of the ages,” and Jesus elsewhere says “that prophets longed to understand this” (Eph. 3:3–6,9 and Matt. 13:17). This mystery is what drives all missions, but especially short-term missions because they are often first-time encounters.

With his answer, Jesus shifts the woman’s question into a different plane altogether, rising above argument to reach dialogue. Vincent Donovan, an iconoclastic Catholic missionary who served among the Masai in the 1970s, in a book that influenced many, describes it: “[D]o not try to call them back to where they were, [or] to where you are, as beautiful as that place might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you

nor they have ever been before.”³ This encounter is the foundation of the church where differences between Jew and Gentile, male and female, rich and poor, sinner and righteous are undone, and where freedom and grace are realized.

The Samaritan woman is transformed. She leaps from the depths of her despair and begins to run, shouting all the way to those who despise her, that here, finally, is the Prophet, the one who brings life at the very point where she had felt most damned. The story later repeats what she says, “Come see this man who knows everything I’ve ever done. He knows who I am!” Her self-worth is restored, or maybe even just birthed. Jesus doesn’t even mention the word “repent” (his first words in other Gospel accounts), but we know that repentance has come, because this is the birth of the first non-Jewish community of Christ followers (John 4:41–2).

The humble position of Jesus as a supplicant before the woman, and his expectation that she was prepared to respond to truth, sets the stage for all of this. Jesus, our guide to all truth, reveals what should be our own attitude. Paul defines it a bit more clearly, commanding us to have such a mind in Philippians 2: “Though [Jesus] was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God” (NLT). This should be the primary dynamic of all cross-cultural encounters of any time duration, whether days, weeks, years, or decades. So, what might that look like?

My wife and I have served in partnership with a variety of Anabaptist-affiliated agencies, congregations, and individuals over the years. Through these relationships, our team has organized and led perhaps several hundred people through short-term learning experiences over the last two decades. However, in my first years on the field, I avoided hosting short-term mission trips because everything I saw seemed to be premised on this assumption: “We have it together and want to share with you folks who are so needy. Here, let me show you how it’s done. Let me fix this.” I think that our Mennonite background makes us especially susceptible to this attitude (I was raised to practice farming and fix things, to be hardworking and handy with tools). However helpful our skills are, they don’t always help us value people at the bottom of the social scale (of human making). Traditional Mennonite values of humility and modesty, which align so well with Paul’s admonition in Philippians, seem to recede quickly when we meet people who may appear less practical or punctual, or analytical, or hardworking.

3 Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Today* (Orbis, 1993), vii.

After some time, though, I realized that my Hispanic friends gained something in such encounters: they built relationship with others in the kingdom, they shared their journeys, and they inspired one another. I had learned as a Mennonite to value community and discipleship, and this made me wonder if short-term trips could build relationships based on humility and respect while avoiding the pitfalls. Living among the indigenous Mixtec people while in Mexico, I learned over time how they longed for *to'o*, respect. This is perhaps their biggest “felt need”; they bemoaned lack of respect continually. Often, their encounters with outsiders degraded dignity, reinforcing their position at the bottom of the social scale. What better way to demonstrate respect than to have the travelers stay with my Mexican friends, enjoy their famous hospitality, and sleep in their beds, or on their floors, and eat their *chile*-laced food? So we began to offer this alternative to the traditional short-term trip, which has resulted in many beautiful cross-cultural relationships.

Now our church planting team in Mexico helps new members and short-term visitors focus on receiving and learning. The host families are the experts in their world, and the visitors are the tiny babes, often unable to even go to the restroom correctly. If short-termers can break out of their cultural bubble and go one by one to stay with host families, learning a few phrases of the local language daily, limiting themselves to the food served at locally normal hours, and observing another way of life while reserving judgment, then we honor people often dismissed by outsiders. If we can hold off on giving them our old clothes, building their buildings, preaching their sermons, or running their evangelistic campaigns, then we do what Jesus did when he first approached a new culture. There will be room to do more later on, but first we hope they will respond openly as the Samaritan woman did because we have valued them, respecting them as we would our own kind, and expecting that God has already been at work long before we arrived. If, through us, they experience Christ's acceptance — his valuing of what they already know and do — we gain the opportunity to share his news as good news, and when they share this message on their own as the Samaritan woman did, others are transformed as well. I believe that we too are transformed through this experience, and that together, two cultures walking hand-in-hand, we can be blessed as “God has come to dwell among us.”

Anabaptists, especially those who struggle with contradictory North American values, should look to Jesus' practice and teachings to shape cross-cultural interaction. God's incarnation among us is itself critical to the kingdom of heaven, and of first importance as we forge relationships filled with hope and dignity with people from other cultures.