Have you ever felt shame for something you did; something that was illegal or sinful? Or, maybe you can remember back to a time when you were a child and you did something you were told not to do, and you got caught. Some of us have learned about shame at a very early age. Our parents may have been the most loving and well meaning parents, but they may have responded to something we did in a way that leaves us feeling embarrassed.

In today’s Gospel story we can sense the shame of woman at the well. We can also be fairly sure that Jesus did not condemn this woman or try to shame her. No, he did not shame this woman any more than he would shame or condemn the woman caught in adultery, later in John’s Gospel (John 8:1-11).

We should not condemn this woman either. Jesus commands his followers not to judge, lest we be judged. Another important factor to consider in this situation is that in the first century only the man had the right to divorce his spouse. The divorce was executed by the man by simply declaring, “I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you!” At that point the former wife would be sent to the street without any property or resources to survive. Who knows, maybe the woman caught in adultery in the 8th Chapter of John was a divorced woman trying to survive.

The fact that Jesus engaged this woman in conversation in a public place would make him a violator of rabbinical law. Earlier, in Jewish history women were held in higher regard, but by the 1st Century they were treated like Gentiles, and other undesirables. Jesus quietly addresses her shame in a private way and does not expose her to further humiliation. Her shame is
evident in her coming to the well in the heat of the day so as to avoid the scorn of other women in the village. Her solitary existence is part and parcel to the judgment that was leveled against her by her estranged husband(s) and neighbors. This is the same loneliness we feel when we are shamed or judged to be unworthy.

An interesting parallel between the Samaritan woman’s story and her fellow Samaritan countrymen is that the Jewish community treated all Samaritans with disdain. The reason for the contempt leveled at the Samaritan community was due to their apostasy. During the Babylonian Exile the Samaritans had changed from being faithful Jews to worshiping the gods of their Babylonian captors. They worshiped the 5 Baals of Babylon and not YHWH, the one true God of their ancestors. Like the Samaritan woman their relationship with one God devolved into a multiplicity of allegiances and misplaced faith. They did not have one Lord – they had five and the Lord they had now was not their God. So how can this story be instructive for us and how can it help us in our faith journey?

Imagine that you meet Jesus in the midst of your shame – discovered in that one act or disposition that you hide and would do anything to keep hidden from those you love, or those you work with, or worship with. Perhaps you harbor hatred or a deep-seated prejudiced against someone or even a whole group, or maybe it is the fact that you cheat on your taxes, or flirt with people (or worse) unbeknownst to your spouse, or perhaps you steel from your employer, or gossip so as to injure your rivals. Imagine now that Jesus comes to you at the very moment of your realization that you did the one thing you promised yourself you wouldn’t do again. He looks into your eyes and you see his great sadness and pain. What do you say – what can you say? What do you imagine he says to you?

You expect the worst – you expect that he will give up on your weak and unsuccessful attempts to change and the fact that you have secretly given up on trying to change. You expect his condemnation. You say to yourself, “Why try anymore?” Then he acknowledges your failures, and you wait for the wrath. Instead of His wrath he lets you know that he loves you, and he assures you that with his grace. He says, “My grace is enough.” (2 Corinthians 12:9) “I don’t expect you to be perfect, I only ask that you not give up trying. Please never stop seeking my forgiveness, continue to turn back to me.” With these words, you feel immediately lifted out of your darkness, and hopelessness and your shame is gone. You are so surprised by this newfound energy and hope that you cannot wait to tell others, and your excitement is contagious. You have gone from desperate and convicted sinner to evangelist. Is this possible in your life? The same savior that redeems the woman at the well wishes to redeem your life today.