

At the Well

John 4:5-42

This story of Jesus taking a “short cut” through Samaria to get to Galilee is packed, layer-by-layer, with meaning like the rest of the gospel of John. This particular story is quite long compared to most of the texts we read on Sundays. My guess is that our attention span for bible reading is hardly this long.

Maybe it would help if we made this passage into a feature-length movie. We could include the back story on the Samaritan woman and her five husbands; the history of the enmity between the Jews and Samaritans; the significance of this particular well and the hour at which the woman goes to the well. Then we could wonder about where the disciples go when they search for food and the disciple’s reluctance – or rather – refusal to speak to the woman. We could end the movie with the unnamed Samaritan woman as evangelist, spreading the news of Jesus as Messiah. (This of course paralleling Mary spreading the news of Jesus’ resurrection at the end of the gospel.) But that is only half the given verses for the day.

There are so many places to enter the story it is hard to know where to begin. One that beckons to me is the placing of this story of the Samaritan woman almost immediately after the story of Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee. In John chapter 3, Nicodemus is intrigued by Jesus and wants to know more of his teaching, but he is scared. He comes to Jesus only under cover of darkness. What he hears is a baffling lesson about beginning life anew as if one is being born again.

In chapter 4, John has Jesus traveling through Samaria to Galilee. Geographically he would not need to go this way. He could walk along the Jordan River to get to Galilee, but he chooses this risky trek through Samaria, scholars argue, because this trip is not about geography, it’s about theology. Jesus walks through Samaria where he will meet another inquiring person with a very different reputation at high noon.

We are given this juxtaposition of Nicodemus, a respectable man in the dark of night and a nameless woman of ill repute in the bright light of day. (Gail O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 564) And it is this woman, who has nothing to lose, who listens to Jesus and ends up really getting it. She is the one who understands who he is, what he has to offer and goes out and shares the news with her community.

The unidentified woman comes to the well in the heat of the day. Perhaps, given her marital status, she is not welcome among the other women when they come in the cool early morning. So she comes at noon, to be alone, to avoid ridicule. She is met by this stranger who asks her for a drink. She can tell that he is not like her. He is a Jew and he is breaking the rules by speaking to an unknown woman who is a Samaritan.

The Jews and Samaritans had been enemies for hundreds of years. The Samaritans were descendants of the tribes of Ephraim and the part of Manasseh that remained in this land when the rest were carried off in Babylonian captivity. Those who stayed behind began to mingle and marry the occupiers of the land. When the Jews returned from captivity these now Samaritans worshipped God on Mt. Gerizim. The Jews who had remained faithful to worship in Jerusalem held the Samaritans in contempt. They were religious enemies of the highest order. Jesus meets this woman at the same well where Jacob met Rachel. This was ancient land of great significance. This was the land where Joseph, son of Jacob, was buried. It is at this well, on this land, that Jesus asks for a drink of water.

The woman is uncertain why this stranger would even talk to her across these strict religious lines. Yet she engages him in a long conversation, longer than almost any other recorded in John. It is from this exchange that we the readers, centuries later, come to understand who Jesus is. We watch as the woman experiences Jesus' perceptive powers. She, and we, begin to grasp Jesus' deep understanding of who he is in relation to the Samaritans and Jews - who he is in relation to God.

Jesus asks her for a drink of water. They talk about being thirsty. She accuses him of thinking he is greater than Jacob, but he starts talking about living water that gushes, as if there is a spring nearby that she doesn't know about. But when she asks a question, he starts talking about eternal life and never being thirsty again. She is hooked; she wants some of this water.

The conversation begins to get personal when he tells her about her past husbands; she realizes he is a prophet. While we who imagine ourselves faithful can get critical of this woman and what we imagine to be her lifestyle, Jesus' comments about her five husbands (plus one) are said without judgment, more as a matter of observation. (O' Day, 567)

After he reveals what he knows about her, she ventures even deeper into the exchange with this prophet. With her people worshipping on Mt. Gerizim and him as a Jew worshipping in Jerusalem, how can there be any commonality?

True worship is not dependent on place he says. It is in Spirit and Truth that we must worship. "I know Messiah is coming," she says and he then proclaims himself to be that one. "I AM the messiah you expect." (O' Day, 568)

There it is: the writer's not so subtle reminder of Jesus' relationship to God. "I AM the Messiah" takes us back to God speaking to Moses at the burning bush. God says "I AM who I AM." Remember too that John is the gospel where Jesus says "I AM the True Vine, I AM the Way, I AM the Bread of Life..." John certainly makes a case for Jesus as the Word as God. At this crucial moment of revelation, the disciples return from town with lunch.

The disciples are aghast that Jesus would defile himself this way, with a woman, with a Samaritan. They don't say anything to her nor do they say a word about their concerns to Jesus. She hurries off, without her water jar, to spread the news of this amazing man she met at the well. Jesus turns his attention to the disciples, trying to help them understand life, in metaphor.

This woman, Samaritan-born, with a mysterious marriage history, who is living on the edge of society – it is she that is receptive to Jesus. It is she that understands and shares the news of who she has met. After she tells the people of Sychar about this unknown man the townspeople come to meet him for themselves. Jesus ends up staying in Sychar for 2 days. At the end of two days those who met Jesus are no longer reliant on the story as told by the woman from the well. They now have stories of their own to tell. They have met and talked with Jesus themselves. Now they are all evangelists of the good news.

This story of Jesus' welcome to the scorned outsiders ought to have been a comfort and encouragement to John's community, to the community for whom this gospel was written. John's community probably felt like outsiders. They were still Jewish, but they were not always welcome in the synagogue. (Three times in John the writer refers to the fear of being thrown out of the synagogue.) There must have been some danger of this and yet the message is clear. The outsiders receive good news; indeed spread the good news. You need not be on the inside to receive the love of God, to receive the living water or the bread from heaven.

We see in the next verses in chapter 4 that though the disciples are physically present to Jesus as he tries to explain the food from heaven, the field ripe for harvest, the sowing and the reaping – they ask no questions. They do not engage him as the woman did. They are silent in the face of his teaching. Who are the real insiders now?

At this point as we talk about insiders and outsiders, it would be prudent to speak a word about anti-Semitism. The book of John is often called the most anti-Semitic of the four canonical gospels. It has been used to blame the Jews for killing Jesus. When we read this gospel today it seems to us the story of Christians and Jews struggling against each other. As Christians, it is hard to get away from reading this story from a Christian perspective. But when this was written there were no Christians yet; the readers and most of the players in the text were all Jews (or Samaritans) trying to be faithful as best they knew how. This is the story of a community struggling within itself. The community of John was struggling to stay within the tradition even as they understood Jesus to be the Messiah. Those who impugn Jews for their role in the book of John grossly misuse the text. Remember Jesus also says, "Salvation comes from the Jews."

It is a bit like the infighting that happens with Brethren Christians. We are all trying to be faithful but we find ourselves understanding faithfulness in different ways, in different contexts. In this respect, does our insider/outsider status inform our reading of the bible or does the bible define our status? This detour through Samaria allows Jesus to be recognized as Messiah by the woman at the well. She dares to engage him in a way that the disciples do not, at least in this particular story.

What does it mean that this outsider woman listens to Jesus? What does it mean that Jesus says to the woman "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth." Does that mean that this woman is a true worshipper? That it is her curious and faithful inquiry that helps to bring about the fulfillment of the kingdom of God?

I am beginning to catch a glimmer of a connection between those who are on the edge, their ability to name the Holy and the coming of the reign of God. There is some connection between reaching across boundaries and the reign of God being present. In these exchanges between Jesus and those who are seeking (the woman and Nicodemus) the kingdom is present. It is not about some distant future; it is not about waiting for heaven. It is now. Jesus said, "The hour is coming and it is now." Like good science fiction – the future is now.

We don't have to walk as far as Jesus did to cross over culturally, religiously, socially imposed boundaries. The lines that define who is in and who is out are all around us in the metropolitan area. Not just Christian/Samaritan, but any other religion as well and of course Republican/Democrat, pro-life/pro-choice, white/black/Latino/ Asian/Native American, middle class and not so. Then there all those sexual categories that the church gets so wrapped up in. The point is: when we reach across those artificial lines and form respectful relationships we help to bring the kingdom to earth. Jesus says, "The time is coming and it is now." Remember Isaiah's vision of people from every nation coming to God's mountain? The time is coming and it is now.

Jesus says to the woman at the well, "I AM." He does not say to the woman, "you are not." When Jesus is the "I AM," the woman also becomes an "I". She is no longer an outcast. And when she shares her story with the community they all find their "I" as well. It becomes a community where true worship can happen in spirit and truth, where people are respected and seen as created in God's image.

The time is now. This is an understanding of the future, but this future can be now. The temptation is to read this as an event 2,000 years ago and to look toward an event sometime in the future. But God is with us now, the Word is made flesh. Whenever we follow Jesus' example of crossing boundaries, when we share the good news, when we share the Jesus encounter with another, we experience the fulfillment of Jesus' words.

We need not wait until some heavenly hour, we need not wait until we die or until Jesus comes again. The time is now to worship in spirit and truth, to look for the I AM among us. Let's take that road through Samaria. Let's go to the well and meet the one who offers us living water.

May the I AM be found among us and may we worship in spirit and in truth. Amen.

Prayer:

Created in the image of God, redeemed by the cross of Christ, empowered by God's Spirit, we are sent -- sent to live as faithful, loving stewards of God's gracious gifts of life, hope and joy. Amen.

Pastor Clay Z. Moyer

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