

Where Do You Get That Living Water?

John 4:5-42

Jesus crosses a lot of boundaries in the story of his meeting with the woman at the well. First of all, he was speaking with a woman - he did not know - in a public place. Even his disciples were amazed and wondered why he would do that...Add to it that she was a Samaritan woman. I'm sure you are aware that Samaritans were despised by the Jews. Although they originated from the same people and shared the same scripture, the Torah or the Law, their connection began to deteriorate when David's and Solomon's kingdom of Israel split between northern and southern kingdoms. Over time the Samaritans (of the Northern Kingdom) religious customs and beliefs changed. Particularly offensive was that they built a new center for worship on Mt. Gerazim instead of in Jerusalem...The Samaritans also intermarried with other peoples. Therefore, the Jews considered the Samaritans "goyem," meaning "aliens," not even a nation or a people. And they were considered ritually impure which could be spiritually contaminating for a religious Jew. Yet, Jesus was speaking with this Samaritan woman!

The Samaritan woman was also surprised when Jesus asks her for a drink. "Why are you, a Jew, asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink? We read she is surprised because she knows Jews didn't share things with Samaritans - especially drinking vessels! So, Jesus is violating all kinds of social and religious boundaries in this story by asking for a drink from this woman. And that just piques her interest. She finds Jesus fascinating. She is already wondering, what does he really want? What is he really up to?

This Samaritan woman is a very good student – the kind of student teachers love to have. She is inquisitive. She keeps asking questions. And the questions are very good questions - and she is no pushover. "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob who gave us this well?" She's not afraid to question Jesus - which makes her bolder than the disciples - who, some moments later, keep their questions to themselves. ("I wonder why he is

talking with this woman? What does he want?” and “Did someone give him food?”)...Unlike the clueless disciples, the Samaritan woman is quite insightful. She declares, “Sir, I see you are a prophet.” And later she wonders, “Could this really be the Jewish Messiah”?

The Samaritan woman sees that Jesus not only crosses social and religious boundaries, but he also goes beyond them – he transcends them. “Where can you get that living water?” she wonders. Do you get it when you worship on Mt. Gerazim or in Jerusalem? Where is the right place to worship? Jesus answers, “the time is coming when it won’t matter where you worship because you will worship in Spirit and truth”. Jesus goes beyond the religious categories of Samaritan and Jew with a higher truth that escapes them. Jesus heals the deep division, the deep schism between Samaritan and Jew, bringing reconciliation with God and each other.

When I was reading this text I was thinking about the ways that the church has fragmented...is fragmented. We have the great schisms of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Church. And then the schisms of the Reformation and the Radical Reformation...The followers of Jesus now have split into many fragments, each one with their own distinct voices in faith and practice...Which one is the right way to celebrate? And we have schisms within our own denomination. We have progressives on the one hand and we have conservatives on the other. Each side has organizations within the denomination where congregations or individuals sometimes affiliate with one side or another...Which one has the living water?

I’m still wrestling with the answer to this question. Because it’s tempting to say that no one has it completely right. There is no church tradition that has all the perfect answers...But that is not what scripture tells us. We are told that Jesus transcends the

categories. Jesus claims us, redeems us, and transforms us – so that we, the church, are a reflection of God’s glory in the world.

We know that we are thirsty. What is it that keeps us coming back to the well? Do we even know what we thirst for? Do we know what we need? Like the woman at the well, sometimes we come looking for one thing and God gives us another. God knows our deepest need, our deepest thirst. We might not know what we need because we’ve never seen it or experienced it. How can you know what you’re missing if you don’t have it? We often grow most from something unexpected that rocks us to the core. Like when Jesus tells the woman that he knows she’s had five husbands.

Certainly, in spite of what we don’t know, there is a lot that we do know. God has given us scripture to give shape to our faith, to help us know the ways in which we should walk, to give us clarity in faith and boundaries in belief and practice. But there is much that is open to interpretation. Should we baptize infants or adults? Baptize three times forward or once backward? Celebrate the bread and cup only as a part of Love Feast or in Sunday morning worship?...We are all fine now with some of the most contentious issues that concerned Brethren in the past. For example, musical instruments are now acceptable in worship. We all now wash feet “correctly” with the double-mode of feet-washing. Few of us wear plain dress or even head coverings anymore. Yet we still have plenty of issues on which we don’t agree. Should women be called to pastoral ministry? Does Jesus call us to pacifism? Should same-sex couples be permitted to marry? Now I’m not saying we shouldn’t have strong opinions on those issues. I certainly do. I’m just saying that I’m assuming that there is a higher truth that we have not arrived at yet or we would, as the Body of Christ, all be in agreement and all satisfied...Maybe we can accept that Jesus holds that higher truth and we don’t yet hold it completely...

You are aware that the Samaritan woman at the well was the first evangelist. She ran off, leaving her water jug behind, to share the good news with others. But what is the message that she shared? It's pretty unorthodox. She says, "Come and see the one who told me everything I've ever done. He couldn't be the Messiah, could he?" ...That doesn't sound like a very clear articulation of the Gospel to me and yet many believed because of her testimony...God can work with our limited testimony as well! It's true we have to testify fully - as far as our limits will take us. But in doing so, we can extend an invitation for others to come and see for themselves, and God can take it the rest of the way.

In the introduction of Philippians, Paul writes about people who preach the Gospel - for the wrong reasons. Paul writes, "Some preach Christ out of envy or rivalry, but others out of goodwill...But what does it matter whether their motives are false or true. The important thing is that Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice" (Phil 1:15-18)...

Do we have the goodness to acknowledge that the Gospel is preached, even from sources that seem suspect to us? The Samaritan woman was a strange choice as the first evangelist – both a Samaritan and a woman - not someone you'd expect that God would choose to deliver the good news of salvation...

What keeps us from accepting the Gospel message because of the messenger? Are there times when we just close our ears because we consider the source? Prejudice, ego, familiarity, language, genuine differences in Christian practice and belief can keep us from missing the good news when it's offered. Can we learn from other Christians who differ from us in belief and practice? Could we...will we stoop to use a common vessel to get the living water?

Jesus offers reconciliation between Jews and Samaritans, men and women, blacks and whites, goyim / aliens and citizens, progressives and conservatives. In Jesus, we have common ground that transcends our differences. We are called to witness, serving as

God's imperfect evangelists, offering wellsprings of living water to the world through Jesus Christ.

"Are you greater than our ancestor, Jacob?" the Samaritan woman asks Jesus. And the answer is, "Yes!" Jesus surpasses Jacob. Jesus surpasses the Samaritan concept of the Restorer (Samaritan concept of the Messiah) who would come to restore the faithful observance of the Law according to Moses. He also surpasses the Jewish concept of a Messiah who would restore their kingdom by overthrowing the Roman government with military might...And Jesus surpasses the divisions that have plagued the church throughout its existence.

Jesus tells us that our location (religiously and geographically) is unimportant, except in our relation to Him and to one another. So, like the Samaritan woman at the well, let's be persistent in our conversation. Keep asking good questions. Don't be a pushover – have strong opinions. But remember the tenets of our faith. Stay rooted in scripture and grounded in community. Keep working for reconciliation. May Jesus lead us forward, and guide us in the ways of Spirit and truth. Amen.