

Encounters with Jesus: The Woman at the Well

A sermon by

Dean L. Francis

First United Methodist Church

March 19, 2017

John 4:5-15 Common English Bible (CEB)

⁵He came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, which was near the land Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there. Jesus was tired from his journey, so he sat down at the well. It was about noon.

⁷A Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me some water to drink." ⁸His disciples had gone into the city to buy him some food.

⁹The Samaritan woman asked, "Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (Jews and Samaritans didn't associate with each other.)

¹⁰Jesus responded, "If you recognized God's gift and who is saying to you, 'Give me some water to drink,' you would be asking him and he would give you living water."

¹¹The woman said to him, "Sir, you don't have a bucket and the well is deep. Where would you get this living water? ¹²You aren't greater than our father Jacob, are you? He gave this well to us, and he drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock."

¹³Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks from the water that I will give will never be thirsty again. The water that I give will become in those who drink it a spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life."

¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will never be thirsty and will never need to come here to draw water!"

Going to the chapel and we're gonna to get married.

Going to the chapel and we're gonna to get married.

Gee, I really love you and we're gonna to get married.

Going to the chapel of love.

I'm pretty sure that Brian never thought we'd be singing the Shirelles in worship today, but what the heck, it's always good to have a little break on the Sundays in Lent.

In a helpful lecture on this passage, Amy Jill Levine helps us hear this story in a new way — perhaps in a way those first hearers would have heard it. She makes the case that the story is of a "type" — in that as soon as you hear the introduction you would anticipate what is coming next. Indeed, throughout the Hebrew scriptures it seems that when a man meets a woman at a well, a marriage proposal is likely coming soon. For instance, think of Jacob and Rachel, Isaac who sent a servant to find Rebekah, or even Saul who met a number of women at

the well and turns out to be more interested in his lost donkeys. Meeting women at the well was, well, sort of like the chapel of love.

So when Jesus' followers hear a story of him meeting a woman at a well they pretty much think they know what is going to happen next. They have heard this "type" of story before. They think that a marriage proposal or arrangement is likely to be next. And chances are they might have been squirming at the notion that Jesus was being set up with a Samaritan woman. Is it possible that hearing this story is kind of like watching an R rated movie with your mom? It's pretty embarrassing to think that this might be happening to Jesus, the Lord, Messiah, Savior, Son of God -- well you know the resume. And if the story is not about a marriage proposal, the fact is that Jesus is having a conversation with a *woman*, which was highly unlikely in his time.

In his commentary on this passage, Osvaldo Vena, our colleague and a faculty member up the street at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, writes that this story represents the founding narrative for the presence of a considerable number of Samaritans in the Johannine community. He says that a close look at the passage shows that there was ethnic and gender diversity in the early Christian communities.¹ And unlike the Jewish heritage in Jesus' time of exclusiveness, Jesus' interactions with the woman show communities that are being built on openness, hospitality and inclusiveness.²

The story is set against the backdrop of the story we heard last Sunday, Placed side by side in John's gospel, they show the difference between class, status, and gender in the communities that Jesus is forming. Nicodemus represents the exclusive community of Jesus' era, male and a member of the Jewish religious elite. You would expect him to be the example of a religious leader who has it all together...but he is not. Nicodemus struggles with his understanding of Jesus' mission and it is never clear if he becomes a full-fledged disciple of Jesus. The woman at the well, on the other hand, is unnamed, and a member of an ethnic group that was hated by the Jews for their history of racial and religious mixtures.

Yet she is the one who ultimately goes back to her community as a witness and a disciple of Jesus' ministry. Perhaps also in the background are Jesus' words that we are to love our enemies, and his interaction with the woman is another way to show the early church that we are

¹ Osvaldo Vena, Commentary on John 4:5-42, March 2017, Working Preacher Website

² Ibid

more alike than different from our enemies. And maybe that is at least part of the point of the story.

In his commentary, Vena goes on to talk about how this deep engagement that Jesus has with the woman is a sign of respect. Rabbis only engage in serious theological discussion like this when they in fact are taking their conversation partner seriously. In the Nicodemus story that centers around being changed or born from above, it is the religious leader who must be changed, but in this story it may be Jesus himself who is changed.

Vena writes that perhaps through this and other encounters with “outsiders” Jesus is beginning to realize the universal scope of his mission. The communities that are being built are not solely Jewish, male communities...but instead they are communities that cannot be built on old prejudices.³ They must break the social, racial, religious, and gender conventions of the time. They must put aside the old hatreds and hostilities that taint our hearts so that the new realm Jesus is pronouncing can form communities of diverse children of God.

Perhaps what both today’s and last week’s stories have in common is that encounters with Jesus have the power to change us and help us grow. These encounters are sometimes challenging. They can make us uncomfortable and force us to make decisions we might prefer to avoid.

When a refugee or immigrant asks for protection, shall we offer help even when such help challenges the barriers of our assumptions, culture, or even laws?

When someone points out the inequities of our social system, will we stand in the gap and challenge the injustice even in a way that requires us to give up our own privilege in order to ensure that all have the same rights and opportunities?

When a group or individual needs access to food, housing, or health care, will we be brave enough to help make sure it is available to them?

When a lonely person asks us to join her for lunch or coffee, are we willing to set aside the time regardless of our busy schedule?

When life requires unusual action, are we willing to break down the boundaries of our own comfort zone to do the right thing?

³ Ibid

The woman at the well is among us every day and the question is, how are we being called to see her? As someone different than we are or as a conversation partner? As a problem or an opportunity?

In the end, all of us are looking for that cup of water. All of us are thirsty, parched, uncertain, and at times afraid. The community that Jesus is forming, the barriers that he is breaking down, open to us the fountain of new life for us and for the world. And he is inviting all of us to drink deeply from that well. AMEN