

Sermon: Reflections on the Woman at the Well

Year A, Third Sunday in Lent

[Exodus 17:1-7](#); [Psalm 95](#); [Romans 5:1-11](#); [John 4:5-42](#)

Offered March 19, 2017 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

Sermon Introduction:

Last week we started reading from the Gospel of John. It was the story of Nicodemus, the wealthy Jewish political leader who comes to Jesus by night, to ask him questions about the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus' encounter ends with the passage that so many of us love: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life* (John 3:16).

This week we'll read the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. She meets Jesus outdoors, in the bright light of noon. She's a woman, a Samaritan, from all appearances poor and a social outcast. There is no way she could be more different from Nicodemus. Her story follows Nicodemus' in part to really explain what loving the world means to God and what loving God means to Jesus' disciples.

Then, for the next two weeks, we'll look at the story of the Man Born Blind. We'll further explore ideas of discipleship, the love of God, the love for God. We'll look at how our relationship with our past and our future changes because we enter into relationship with Jesus. John writes his Gospel in an arc, with the stories building on one another. Know that today's Scripture reading and reflection are tied to last week and will be important for next week.

I want to give credit to Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis of Luther Seminary. You were kind enough to send me to a seminar with her a couple of Octobers ago. It was a transformational experience and her commentary on the Gospel of John (which you gave me for Christmas a couple years ago) has helped me fall even further in love with a Gospel I adored to begin with.

So let us begin. X, will you read John 4:1-10?

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, 'Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John'— although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar [Sigh'-khar], near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.'

Before we get into the meat of this story, think about what a Gospel is. It is a collection of encounters with Jesus of Nazareth meant to create new believers and sustain current believers.¹ So we have to see a believer being created. If we see someone who's right on the edge of belief, maybe it was just happenstance that tipped them over. If we see someone become a disciple of

¹ Karoline Lewis, *John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 61.

Jesus who no one would ever imagined might become a believer, then we who believe are also sustained.

The phrase “Good Samaritan” has come into our language as something ... good. We have Good Samaritan laws that protect people who do their best to help someone in need, even if they are not successful. So we aren't shocked by the phrase *But he had to go through Samaria*. (John 4:4). The original community that heard this story would have been.

I struggle to convey how shocking this is. It would be like saying he had to go through North Korea. For the people who heard this story originally, there just isn't a reality where there is a single trip, no matter where you start, no matter where you want to end up, that makes you go through Samaria. The Samaritan Bible had only the first five books, the books of Moses. God's holy mountain was Mt. Gerizim in Samaria, not the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.² And they called themselves the Keepers of the Law.³ How confrontational has it gotten to say to your next door neighbors, who see themselves as connecting to the God of Israel through *torah*, through the law of Moses, how confrontational has it gotten for you to call yourselves the Keepers of the Law?

So Jesus has to go through Samaria. Where the people who are least likely of anyone on earth to follow Jesus live.

It's noon. He's been walking with his disciples. Travelers in those parts would carry a kind of animal skin pouch and string that they could lower down the wells they encountered.⁴ But given that the disciples were away buying food, they probably have that with them. Jesus is tired and thirsty. There's nothing divine about him. He's fully human. There's nothing here to signal to her that he might be anything other than some lost Jewish guy who didn't have enough sense to bring his own bucket and travel in the cool of the evening.

She knows who she is, her identity is very clear to her. When she asks, '*How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?*' (John 4:9), she's really asking if he knows what he's doing. It isn't that this conversation is unusual. This conversation is impossible. It exists outside the realm of possibilities. She knows what's going on. She's not sure if he does.

She's the most unlikely disciple Jesus could have. There's no reason she would give him a drink of water, let alone follow him. But God so loves the world. All world. No exceptions. No corners left out. No matter how disagreeable the people there are. No matter how little the people there can imagine themselves loved by God.

But she hears something in Jesus' voice when he replies *Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.'* (John 4:10).

***HYMN: #506 "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say"**

² Lewis, 53.

³ Lewis, 53.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*. Vol. 1. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975: 153.

A Mutual Relationship

The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

With this unlikely of disciples, we see her almost converted, almost all the way there. When they first meet, she doesn't know what to make of him, this thirsty and tired Jew, who shouldn't be there at all, let alone talking to her. She knows her own tradition, knows why Jacob is important to her people. She knows where her people worship God and how that separates her people from Jesus' people. She knows who she is, she thinks she knows who he is, although her response to his comment about the living water shows she's beginning to catch on that Jesus might be something more.

Jesus tells her to go get her husband. This has to be painful for her. To survive as a woman, not in the Oprah, live-your-best-life kind of way, I mean to have food and shelter as a woman, she needed to be married. If she's been married five times, it's highly likely that she's been divorced.⁵ Probably for being barren⁶ or only giving birth to daughters. When Jesus names this reality of her history, he reveals something profoundly intimate about himself.

He knows what it is to *be* her. He takes the incarnation so seriously that he will name what has shaped her entire reality. He knows how vulnerable she is, with a knowledge that runs deep in his body and bones. For God so loved the world. That's how much he loves her. He is willing to share that experience with her. She moves from seeing him as a man to seeing him as a prophet to suspecting he is the Messiah. Not just because he told her who he was. But because he told her who she was. She was so much more than a woman, a Samaritan with five failed marriages in her past. She was so much more than all the categories someone want to put her in. It wasn't enough that Jesus knew that. He needed her to know that. She needed him and he needed her. The need was mutual. And he needed her to see that too. Jesus reveals the entirety

⁵ Lewis, 60.

⁶ Lewis, 60.

of who he is, in all its intimacy, vulnerability, and awe, to her.⁷ For God so loved the world. Even as Jesus was thirsty, he gave water and more to those who thirsted for his love.

*** HYMN: #608 “As Water to the Thirsty”**

Abiding Beliefs

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or, ‘Why are you speaking with her?’ Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’ They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, ‘Rabbi, eat something.’ But he said to them, ‘I have food to eat that you do not know about.’ So the disciples said to one another, ‘Surely no one has brought him something to eat?’ Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, “Four months more, then comes the harvest”? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, “One sows and another reaps.” I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.’

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I have ever done.’ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.’

The disciples return and are shocked by what they see: their rabbi speaking to a Samaritan woman. They try to get him to eat and he declines, insisting that he has other food. This whole passage has focused on how transformative it is that God so loved the world that God became a bodily part of it, fully human, fully divine. When Jesus bodily leaves this world, he will ask his disciples to take on his work, to reap what he has sown. God’s work in this world gets done by human bodies, by vulnerable, flawed, fragile human bodies. How much more shocking is that than the idea of a Jewish rabbi speaking to a Samaritan woman?

When the disciples appear, she runs off leaving her water jug behind. More than the jug, she has left behind her loneliness, ostracism, marginalization because Jesus has made her one of his own. She leaves behind her disgrace to enter into abundant life. She leaves behind her barrenness to give birth to new believers. She leaves behind her old identity to become a witness to the presence of God living bodily in this world.⁸ She is reborn in the way that Nicodemus could not get his head around, she is reborn of water and the Spirit.

She tells her people to come and see, just as Jesus told the first disciples he called on the Sea of Galilee.⁹ And yet, even as she is calling to them, she says, *He cannot be the Messiah, can he?* (John 4:29). The way that question is written in Greek means she expects a negative answer, surely this cannot be the Christ, can it?¹⁰ So everything she has done, everything that she has

⁷ Lewis, 62.

⁸ Lewis, 64.

⁹ Lewis, 64.

¹⁰ Lewis, 65.

changed in how she views herself, her world and her God, all that has occurred while she still had doubts. To be without doubt would imply that it was reasonable for God to love the world enough that the Word would take on flesh. To be without doubt would imply that it was reasonable for God to be so vulnerable that God would need a drink of water when God was tired in the heat of the noonday sun. And that's not reasonable. That's shocking. But that's what happens when people stop worrying about agreeing with what's been said *about* Jesus and enter into a true relationship *with* Jesus. The shocking becomes acceptable. The doubts are worth moving beyond, even as we acknowledge they exist.

The Samaritans ask Jesus to stay with them. Technically, they ask Jesus to abide with them, a phrase which first comes up when Jesus calls his first disciples back in Galilee. In this Gospel, abiding and believing are synonyms.¹¹ When Jesus abides with us, we are in an intimate relationship with Jesus. In this Gospel, the Samaritans are the only ones to call Jesus Savior. They know what they want, they want to abide with Jesus, here in this world. They want Jesus to walk with them.

HYMN: #642 "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me"

¹¹ Lewis, 67.