

“The Woman at the Well”

John 4:1-30, 39-42

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The story of Jesus and his encounter with the woman at the well is one of the most iconic stories in all of scripture- the conversation he has with her is the longest dialogue he has with any person in any of the gospels, longer than he has with any of his family, his accusers, or even his own followers. It is interesting to note that John is the only gospel writer to record this meeting although neither he nor any of the other disciples were on hand when these two had their meeting. What makes this account especially interesting is that it can be viewed as the reverse or flipside of what had taken place in the PREVIOUS chapter--chapter 3--where Jesus is approached by Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews- an episode I preached on two weeks ago. Look at the contrast John establishes between these two individuals. First, where Nicodemus had a name, the woman at the well remains anonymous- we're never told her identity. Where the former was a rich and powerful male, she was a poor woman who had been marginalized by society. Where he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, she was a Samaritan, a branch of Judaism held in great contempt by orthodox Jews. Where Nicodemus approaches Jesus under the cover of night so no one would see him, THIS encounter takes place at noon day, where everyone could observe it. And perhaps the most GLARING difference is where he was a pious Pharisee who represented the highest and best his religion had to offer, she was a noted sinner, a woman who had lived with five men and was now living with another without the benefit of marriage to any of them. The contrast between the two couldn't have been more stark, and yet as we'll see, where Nicodemus seems to demonstrate complete ignorance as to the most fundamental elements of his faith, this poor, unnamed outcast shows a far greater comprehension of God who before the day was through, would become Christianity's very first evangelist. She also receives the honor of being the first person in John's gospel to whom Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah, God's long-Promised Savior.

Our scripture reading for this morning--chapter four--opens with Jesus deciding to lay low for a while after the Pharisees get wind of how his popularity throughout Judea was growing even larger and faster than that of JOHN the Baptist, a man despised by the religious and political establishment for his never-ending criticism of them both. If John's life was ALREADY endangered, how much more did they want to see JESUS gone, and he knew that if he remained in the area much longer, his own ministry could be over before it even got started. Hence, he heads back north to the safety and security of Galilee where he'd grown up and his family still lived.

Our text informs us straight off that on the way there, Jesus “HAD TO PASS THROUGH SAMARIA.” Well, the truth is he didn't HAVE to go through Samaria- no self-respecting Jew would ever have DARED to pass through that region in order to reach Galilee, such was their contempt of the people who lived there. They would rather take a long and tedious detour around to the east and across the Jordan River in order to avoid coming into contact with them. Thus the verse REALLY implies that Jesus had deliberately decided to go through Samaria and that he had a very personal reason for doing so- a decision that must have perplexed his disciples.

Arriving at the town of Sychar, there was a well there where tradition had it that it was

the place the Patriarch Jacob first encountered Rachel many centuries before. Weary and thirsty from traveling those dusty desert roads during the hottest part of the day, Jesus sent his disciples into the city to buy groceries while he sat down and rested beside it. At the very same time, there came a woman to the well to draw water from it. Now it was the custom for the women of the town to fill their water jars early in the morning while it was still cool outside. It ALSO served as a meeting place for them to get together and socialize amongst themselves. However, because THIS woman was an outcast and had apparently no children or friends to speak of, she had to go when nobody else would be there and unfortunately , it was ALSO when heat of the noonday sun was most oppressive.

When the woman sees Jesus resting beside the well, she suddenly stops. Naturally, his needs must always come before her own and so she waits for him to help himself first. But that's when Jesus does the unexpected- rather than drawing the water himself, he asks if SHE might get it FOR HIM. Now this was a major breach of protocol; no Jew would EVER ask a Samaritan for ANYTHING, much less a drink of water. In that simple request, Jesus shattered all the social and cultural taboos that governed Jewish-Samaritan relations- gender discrimination, ritual purity, that is, sharing a drinking cup with a Samaritan, socio-economic poverty as any woman married five times was most likely to be poor, religious hostility, and the moral stigma of serial marriages.

Recognizing that Jesus was a Jew, she is taken aback and asks how he--a Jew--would ask of her—a WOMAN of all people—for a drink of water. Jesus responds, “If you knew the actual identity of who it is that makes such a request, you would have asked him and he would have given you LIVING water.” She thinks that by “living water” Jesus was referring to moving water, that is, to water that flows continuously as in a spring or a stream as opposed to “standing water” which one might find in a pool, a well or even a vessel such as a clay pot; water which if it remains undisturbed long enough could eventually grow stagnant and become undrinkable. She must think that Jesus knows of a greater source of such refreshing water and asks where it is located so she might get some there herself. She wants to know how it is he knows of BETTER water if even their forefather Jacob and his family came and drank from this well and even used it to water his animals with. His response is that everyone who drinks from that well will eventually thirst again, but whoever drinks from the water HE gives, will NEVER thirst again- it will become a spring welling up to eternal life. “Sir,” she replied, “give me this water and then I’ll never be thirsty again.” Her thinking was that if she got a hold of this living water, she’d never have to drag herself outside in the heat of day to fill that heavy jug with water and then haul it back home any longer, relieving her of ONE MORE onerous burden in her life.

This woman makes the same mistake so many others do in John’s gospel- those who are supposed to understand the meaning of Jesus’ words haven’t a clue as to the spiritual truths he is trying to communicate by them. In their blindness, Jesus’ words are interpreted literally when he is purposely employing metaphors to convey deeper realities about God and our relationship to him. When Jesus told THE JEWS IN CHAPTER 2, “Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” he was actually referring to his own body- to his future crucifixion and subsequent resurrection and not to Herod’s great edifice that took years to construct. When he spoke to NICODEMUS of how one must be “born again” IN CHAPTER 3, we are told how our Lord was referring to a person’s “spiritual” rebirth and not a physical one as the learned Pharisee and member of the Jewish Sanhedrin took it to mean. And then here IN CHAPTER 4, when Jesus refers to “living water,” THIS WOMAN supposes that he is referring to PHYSICAL water,

the kind she had come to retrieve herself when he is actually speaking of that which will slake one's "spiritual" thirst and contribute to not just our physical life but MORE importantly, to ETERNAL life.

After introducing this notion of "living water," Jesus changes the subject and brings up a matter of a most intimate nature when he asks her to go and call her husband to come there; he says he wants to meet him. Of course she has no husband to speak of and she confesses as much, a matter of fact which Jesus was ALREADY aware of. Still, her truthfulness and honesty about something so personal tells us something about the trust she is already developing between herself and him. Sensing that Jesus may actually be a prophet of God, she raises a major theological question, that which for centuries had served as the major source of contention between the two peoples. She says, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain (she was referring to Mt. Gerizim) but YOU say that Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." Knowing that there could only be one correct answer to her question, she's curious to see how he resolves this conundrum- are the SAMARITANS correct in their understanding and worship of God or are the JEWS?

Christ's response is that the hour is coming when people will NO LONGER worship EITHER in Jerusalem--the City of David--or at Mt. Gerizim, the location and center of the Samaritan's temple worship. The time has arrived when people will worship the Father in both "spirit and in truth," the only TRUE worship which God has ever desired. In other words, the worship of God would no longer be confined to one group of persons at one specific mountain for God would be worshiped by ALL persons, regardless of who they were or where they happened to be. Furthermore, they would no longer require special temples with specific rituals led by a qualified priesthood to serve as intermediaries between themselves and God for EVERYONE would have direct and immediate access to him.

A little background information is required here. Jerusalem was the center of Judah's religious life and worship, as was Mt. Gerizim for the Samaritans. Similarly, each was convinced that THEY ALONE possessed a monopoly on the one TRUE God and that all the OTHERS were "false faiths." Therefore, among all the nations of the earth, they viewed THEMSELVES as the ONE TRUE PEOPLE of God, consigning the rest as heretics and idolators. But here was Jesus challenging that most sacredly-held belief when he says that the time was at hand when NEITHER Jerusalem NOR Mt. Gerizim would serve as the locus or center where man meets God. Furthermore, Jesus refers to God as his "FATHER," that is, in familiar terms, thus implying he knew God PERSONALLY. This ALSO overturned a central tenet of their beliefs. You see, to the Jews, when the Old Testament refers to God as "Father," it was always in connection to the NATION OF ISRAEL as God's "son" or "child" and never to any specific person or individual. They regarded God as much too holy and human beings as far too sinful to maintain any kind of PERSONAL or PRIVATE relationship with him. And what's more, Jesus also seems to suggest that that same relationship is now being made available to OTHERS AS WELL, that the hour has now come when God's exclusive relationship to the Jews has suddenly become an INCLUSIVE one, a loving, caring relationship that is now extended to people EVERYWHERE- SAMARITANS INCLUDED!

Thus when Jesus says that TRUE worship is to worship God "in Spirit and in truth," he was declaring the inauguration of an entirely new era in divine-human relations, a totally fresh beginning for the sons and daughters of God. Their oppressive system of formal laws and

external practices and religious rituals which for centuries had formed the cornerstone of Israel's life and identity has now been rendered null and void, replaced with a WHOLE NEW FREEDOM. No longer confined to a holy temple either in Jerusalem OR Mt. Gerizim, God can NOW be worshiped ANYWHERE. No longer would forgiveness be based upon offerings and sacrifices for now the ONLY offering and sacrifice God demands is that of one's own heart, nor would they need official priests to serve as intermediaries between themselves and God because people EVERY WHERE could now come directly and immediately into his holy presence by simply opening up their heart to him. Hence, OUR HEART--the CENTER of our being--has become God's NEW TEMPLE, his NEW HOME, indwelling both young and old, rich and poor, women as well as men, Samaritans and Jews alike.

The discussion up to this point now sets the stage for the most marvelous declaration in all the gospels. In response to this promise of a new relationship with God that is personal and all-inclusive, the woman replies, "I know that the Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things." That's when Jesus responds with the clearest and most self-revelatory of all his pronouncements, "I who speak to you am he." What makes this, the only confession of his messiahship in the entire gospel of John, is that he expresses this acknowledgement, not before a Judean or Galilean, not even before his disciples, but to an unnamed SAMARITAN, what's more, to an unnamed SAMARITAN WOMAN, and what's EVEN more amazing, to an anonymous SINFUL SAMARITAN WOMAN.

At last the disciples return from their grocery run and upon seeing their master speaking to this woman, seem scandalized by it. While they were out securing "physical" bread for that day's sustenance, here Jesus was feeding her "spiritual" bread, that which would satisfy her hunger for a LIFETIME. They ask no questions as they are even too embarrassed to say anything. Overwhelmed and excited by this encounter with Jesus, she immediately takes off, headed for the center of the city to tell anyone with ears to hear, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" In her haste to get the word out, she leaves her pot behind, that vessel which for years had been her sole means for collecting water. But then again, maybe she left her water pot behind because she no longer needed it as she traveled to tell others about Christ. This nameless Samaritan woman who left her waterpot at the well has HERSELF become a vessel for the gospel. Her life, a clay pot, now contains the greatest treasure of all, and she shares it with others, regardless of cultural codes. No longer does she need the container for her daily life, for her life itself has become the pitcher that contains Christ's living water for the world. In her testimony she offers to others an opportunity to taste the water that will quench people's thirst and restore their souls.

Well, that's the story as best as I understand it, but what value does it hold for US, this morning? How can it's message inspire and animate us to the same extent it did for this woman? I'll tell you how! To begin with, it is important to understand that this was no ordinary woman going about her regular duty of retrieving water as was required each day- this was a person who bore the burden of a number of social and cultural stigmas, someone who was considered and treated as a complete outcast in her community- culturally, socially, and morally. But there is one more consideration we haven't mentioned which may yet hold the key as to why she is so suddenly changed by the end of the account. If she had become a pariah among her own family, friends and neighbors in the community, she had to have posed no less a scandal to her own religion and her worshiping community as well. No doubt, even the priests were aware of her situation and hence denied her entrance to their holy temple, forbidding her from participating in

any of the festivals and events that went along with it. But let's take it even one step further- this had to lead her to believe she was an outcast, an object of sinful scorn in the EYES OF HER GOD AS WELL. To be rejected by one's family, friends and neighbors was one thing, but then compound all the pain and feelings of worthlessness she had been feeling by adding to it rejection by her GOD, and then you can see the dire state this woman lived in. She had no one left to turn to, and even though she was presently living with another man, she had to believe like all the others she had taken up with, he in time would eventually reject her ALSO!

Then Jesus suddenly entered her world, in what seems to us may have been a brief conversation, his words to her opened up an entirely NEW world of TRUE love and hope. By opening the love of God to even SINNERS SUCH AS HERSELF, she would never have reason to seek another lover as long as she lived. By his willingness to transgress every social and cultural taboo and show how he accepted her unconditionally, feelings of her old self are revived and she can start to see herself as a person of self-worth, as one possessing human dignity again as she ONCE did. But this is what Jesus does when we encounter him- as I said last week in my sermon on the Gadarene demoniac, all those labels which society may place on us, in HER case- harlot, strumpet, WHORE, suddenly fall away for good and instead he confers upon us the one and only REAL identity we shall ever need and wear with pride- "child of God," "heirs and joint-heirs with Christ himself," and "brothers and sisters to one another" REGARDLESS of age or sex or sexual orientation, regardless of race or ethnicity or economic and social status. And if this is how Christ will forever LOOK UPON and REGARD US, then how can WE not look in the mirror and regard OURSELVES as such, AS WELL.

And if Jesus reminded her that she was loved, by one far greater than any lover she's ever had or WILL have, he informs her that she is unconditionally loved and accepted by HER GOD, TOO! The temple priests may have deprived her the right to worship God on Mt. Gerizim, but by worshiping him "in spirit and in truth," she has learned she can enter into fellowship with God ANYWHERE and at ANY TIME WITHOUT the need of some priest having to act as a gate-keeper. The fact is NOBODY has that power to determine who may love God- NOT WHO or HOW or WHEN or WHERE when God loves each and every member of his creation with the exact same love that he loves his only-begotten son with.

In many ways, this woman's lot paralleled the situation that confronted the demoniac from last week's message. Both were made victims by their community who shunned them and sought to keep them segregated- the first out of fear and the second out of a sense of moral superiority. But just as Jesus intentionally traveled "to the other side," not to change the entire town but for just one man who, in turn, would become the vehicle for transforming the rest of that community with a message of love and freedom, so does Jesus deliberately go to Sychar in Samaria to minister to just one woman. He did not know her name but he CERTAINLY knew her loneliness and her pain. Likewise, the woman at the well would become the very first evangelist in John's gospel and as a vessel now filled with "living water," she would bear that same message of love and freedom to HER community by which they would eventually have their OWN thirst slaked and be transformed THEMSELVES. And if Jesus was willing to travel to such obscure and out-of-the-way places just to reach one individual and make them "human" once again, then how much MORE will he endure to get to US and restore to US the help and health WE so desperately need! Amen and amen...