

27 October 2019

Jesus Meets *That* Woman

John 4:1-30

We have a lengthy but important scripture today, the story of the Woman at the Well. This conversation is recounted only in John's gospel and by itself is worth the price of admission. We read John chapter 4, the first 30 verses:

4 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, 'Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John'—² although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—³ he left Judea and started back to Galilee. ⁴But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The 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.) ¹⁰Jesus 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.' ¹¹The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' ¹³Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but 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.' ¹⁵The 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.'

¹⁶Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' ¹⁷The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' ¹⁹The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' ²¹Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But 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. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' ²⁵The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' ²⁶Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

²⁷Just 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?' ²⁸Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him.

This story comes just one chapter after Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, which I talked about last week. In that sermon, I presented Nicodemus as a personification of a certain kind of faith, which I called the "*almost-faith*." Nicodemus was drawn to Jesus, and apparently continued to feel that way up to the point of Jesus' death, but he never quite made a commitment to follow him. Jesus' teachings were simply too challenging, too radical, and too personally inconvenient. Well, today we meet the anti-Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a male from the dominant religious group, the Jews. This woman is a female from a despised religious minority, the Samaritans. Nicodemus was a man of power and position and influence; the Samaritan woman was a woman with a shameful past and a scandalous present life. Nicodemus had the advantage of having seen Jesus do miraculous signs; to the Samaritan woman he was a random stranger.

But what a different story this is. Let's walk back through the story, a little more slowly. It starts with Jesus sitting alone beside a well in Samaria. Now, as the author reminds us in v. 9, "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans." In the first century, Jewish people saw the Samaritans as a mongrel race – partly Jewish, but interbred with Gentiles – and saw the Samaritan version of the Jewish faith as equally illegitimate. Samaritans were regarded as unclean, untouchable. But when a woman comes out to the well to draw water, Jesus immediately opens up a conversation. "Could I have a drink?" The woman can only stare. Apparently she can tell by looking at him – the way he's dressed or something – that he's Jewish, because she says, "Are you . . . talking to *me*? But Jews don't talk to Samaritans, especially women. You're asking *me* for a drink?"

As often happens in the Gospel of John, Jesus doesn't answer directly. He says, "If you knew who I am, you would ask me for a drink, and I would give you living water." Taken literally, this is ridiculous, as the woman points out: "With what? You don't have a bucket. If I had a penny for every time a man has made me empty promises –" Jesus replies, "Not that kind of water. The water in your well is fine, but everyone who drinks of it will get thirsty again. The water that I have to give is forever, it enters into your soul and becomes a spring that never dries up." By this time we, the readers, have figured out that Jesus is using water as a metaphor for a spiritual gift, but the woman says, "Give me some of that water! I would *love* to never have to trudge out to the well again!"

Jesus changes the subject. "Tell you what, why don't you go get your husband?" She replies, "Oh, I'm not married" and Jesus says, "Technically true. You've been married five times and are currently with number six but not married to him. So, you're not lying." I'm not sure exactly how I would respond to this in her shoes. What do you say to someone who has just given a thumbnail sketch of your whole disreputable past? But this woman doesn't get angry or frightened or, apparently, embarrassed. She says, "I see you're a prophet" – that is, one who has particular knowledge from God – "So tell me this: you Jews claim that Jerusalem is the right place to worship, and we Samaritans say that the right place is our own mountain here in Samaria. Which is it?" Now this might feel like an odd right turn in the conversation, but it isn't. I've experienced versions of this many times myself. Theological arguments are great things to bring up when the conversation starts to feel a little too personal. When things start to get a little close to home, you can always use theology as a diversionary tactic. Some might argue that distracting people from important matters is what theology does best. Jesus doesn't take the bait. He refuses to pick sides in a theological dispute. He says, "Neither. It isn't about who has the best mountain or the right temple. The time is coming when none of that is going to matter.

Those who worship God truly will be the ones who worship God in the spirit, because God is spirit. Geography is irrelevant.”

The woman looks at him and says, “I have heard that one day there will come an anointed one from God – a Messiah – who will make all these things clear.” And for once Jesus replies plainly: “You’re talking to him.” The woman throws down the jar she had brought to get earthly water and runs back to town shouting, “Come and see this man at the well! He knows everything I’ve done, *and he talked to me!* I think he might be the Messiah, but you come and see for yourselves!”

For all their differences, there are some curious similarities between this scene and the scene with Nicodemus. Both Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman misunderstand something Jesus says right at the start. Nicodemus misunderstands “you must be born from above” as “you must undergo a second human birth.” The woman misunderstands Jesus’ offer of “living water” as some sort magic thirst quencher. And, to be fair, both sayings are obscure, metaphorical statements that anyone might have trouble understanding. So, in both conversations, Jesus goes on to explain that he is talking about a spiritual reality that is not of this world. To Nicodemus he was talking about a spiritual rebirth that is a gift of God through faith. To the woman he was talking about a spiritual water, the spring of hope and eternal deliverance that is a gift of God.

That’s where the similarities end, though. In John 3, Nicodemus withdraws from the conversation, but in John 4, the woman engages. She demands more explanations, and when Jesus confronts her with her own checkered past, she tries to change the subject, but she stands her ground and keeps asking questions, giving Jesus a chance to explain more fully. What he says to her is challenging. She asks him to resolve a religious argument between the Jewish and Samaritan faiths, and Jesus tells her, in essence, that both sides fall short of the truth, that God is bigger than both religions and that true worship of God is found, again, in the spirit. Because God is spirit. Even that doesn’t faze the woman. She keeps asking questions. Both the Samaritan and Jewish faiths – because they both used the Hebrew Torah – spoke of a Messiah to come, and so she brings up that prophecy of hope. Finally, as if her persistence and willingness to listen had earned her the right to hear plain speaking, Jesus reveals himself to her.

As I said last week, the whole purpose of the Gospel of John is to explore faith, to present the One in whom to believe – for whoever believes in him will have eternal life. From the paired stories of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, we learn some important things about that faith. First, it’s not about how much you know, not even how much scripture and theology you know. In fact, sometimes that can get in the way, because true faith comes from above, from the Spirit of God. But that doesn’t mean that faith won’t require any effort. In both conversations, Jesus starts out with a frustratingly obscure statement, as if he’s testing to see if they are willing to push back, to question, to probe, and to give up prior assumptions. The Samaritan woman does. Maybe it’s easier for her – being at the bottom of the heap socially, the woman that parents warned their daughters not to be like – she has nothing really to lose in listening to strange ideas. Or maybe it was just her. Whatever the case, she stuck with the conversation and in the process revised her impression of who Jesus was. At first he was just “a Jewish man” – that is, one of those people who despised her. Then he was “a prophet” – a man who had been touched with divine knowledge. By the end, he was “the Messiah” – the one the world had been waiting for – and she rushed off, an impromptu missionary, to tell everyone she saw that God was doing something she had never imagined. Come and see for yourself.