

Face to Face With God
John 4:5-42
First Presbyterian Church
February 14, 2021

Introduction – Jews and Samaritans

Bible Reading

Prayer for Illumination

We are thirsty, O Christ, for water to sustain us for our journey... water that will quench our deep thirst... water that we might share with others that they, too, might live. Once again, Lord, give us this water. Amen.

Sermon¹

Jesus talks longer to the Samaritan woman at the well than he does to anyone else in all the Gospels - longer than he talks to any of his disciples, longer than he talks to any of his opponents, longer than he talks to any of his own family. She is also the first “outsider” ... to whom he tells the truth... that he is Messiah. And finally, she is the first evangelist in John’s gospel... she’s the first preacher... and her testimony brings many people to faith. But Jesus’ choice of her is a curious one, because when I say she’s an outsider, I truly mean outsider. This woman already had three strikes against her. Strike one - she was a Samaritan, which to the Jewish purists made her a half-breed and a full pagan. Strike two - she was, of course, a woman... and in Jesus’ time, women were not what you would call “liberated.” They weren’t allowed to worship with men... they had no place in public life. They were not to be seen or heard, especially not by holy men... (who wouldn’t even speak to their own wives in public). Though it sounds far-fetched, there was even one group of pious men who were known as “the bruised and bleeding Pharisees” because they closed their eyes whenever they saw a woman coming down the street, even if it meant walking into a wall and breaking their noses. So, she was a Samaritan (Strike one) and a woman (Strike two) ... and strike three - she was also a fallen woman... seen as a severely damaged woman – five times married... and then either divorced or widowed by all. Respectable women made their trips to the well in the morning, when it was cooler and they could gossip and talk about the news. But this woman was one of the people they talked about, and the fact that she showed up at noon – in the heat of the day - was a sure sign that she was not at all welcome at their morning social hour. And I suppose for her, it was just all around less painful to go to the well alone... long after the others had gone.

So, imagine her surprise when she arrives in the heat of the day and sees a strange man sitting beside the well. He could be anyone, of course, but when he lifts his head and asks her for a drink, she sees his olive skin, his dark eyes, his strong nose. He is no half-breed... this man is a Jew... but what in the world is HE doing there? Is he LOST... is he directionally challenged?

¹ Parts of this sermon are adapted from a reflection by Barbara Brown Taylor, “Identity Confirmation,” in *Living By the Word*, *Christian Century*, February 12, 2008.

Most Jews did whatever they could to AVOID Samaria! Or has he lost his *faith*... to be talking to her like that? She knows the Jews have all kinds of rules about what they can eat and drink... and she knows he will be breaking those rules with just one sip from her bucket. So, they talk about that... they talk about the rules... which means they talk about religion... and while it's never clear whether they're on the same wavelength, eventually the woman understands that he has something she wants. "Sir, give me this water," she says. What happens next is unexpected to say the least as "out of the blue" Jesus tells her to go fetch her husband. It's an abrupt change of subject, to which she might rightly object. "I thought we were talking about religion. Now you want to get personal? OK, I have no husband." And with that morsel of truth from HER, he proceeds to tell her the rest of the truth about herself: "I know, I know... you have had five husbands and the man you are with now is not your husband." Note, friends, that he doesn't pull away from her... if anything, he gets closer. He still wants a drink from her... and he wants to give her one too, but the intimacy of it all is suddenly too much for her. So, this time SHE changes the subject... back to religion again, trying to draw him into an argument about "them" versus "us" ... about "Jews" versus "Samaritans." But it doesn't work. When she steps back, he steps toward her. When she steps OUT of the light, he steps INTO it. If she is determined to show him less of herself, he will show her MORE of himself. "I know that the Messiah is coming," she says... and he says... for the first time ever he says: "I am he." It is a moment of full disclosure... complete transparency... in which this woman with three strikes stands face to face with the Messiah of God... and both are completely honest about who they are. This is what judgment looks like in John's gospel – judgment is not fire and brimstone raining down from the sky... it's not the second coming of Christ... it's not Armageddon or the end of the world. No, in the Gospel of John, judgment happened the moment the Word came down from heaven and took on our flesh. And as the Word made flesh, he is the very revelation of God... so that whoever has seen Jesus has already seen God... and in the presence of God everything they have ever done is made known. That is how it still is... when we come face to face with God in Christ, everything we have ever done is made known. God doesn't judge us... Jesus doesn't judge us... but in the presence of Christ all is revealed... you know who you really are... I know who I really am... the good and bad of it... the proud and ashamed of it... the ALL of it...and especially the HOPE in it. Hope... because this Messiah... this Word made flesh... is the only Son that is sent by a Father who so loves this world... Hope... because this messiah is the One who came down to us not to condemn, but to save.² Hope... because this Messiah who knows everything we have ever done still loves us... still pursues us... and still wants to give us living water.

Now, just briefly to the end of the story. What happens? Well, at the end of the day, the Samaritan woman is converted by Jesus, right? Having been told who he was... that he was Messiah... she believes him, right? And believing in him, she abandons whatever she has left of a life and follows him all around Galilee, right? Well, no, not exactly... but having come face to face with Jesus, she DOES go back to the city with an invitation and a question.

² John 3:16-17

The invitation is, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! And then... with a huge question mark in her voice... she asks, “You don’t think he’s Messiah, do you?” Her faith... if you can even call it faith... is new and tentative, it’s unsure and questioning, it’s young and immature. Sure, she was deeply moved by the presence of Jesus... and she’s eager for others to meet him, too. But as Fred Craddock observes: her words are “not exactly a recitation of the Apostles Creed.” They express her hesitancy, her questions, her uncertainty. Yet they do tell us two very important truths. First, the truth that even there in Samaria... even there among these “outsiders” whom the so-called “chosen people” so looked down on... even THERE our Lord found a deep spiritual thirst a thirst for the HIS kind of water.³ And because EVEN in Samaria there is a deep spiritual thirst, we must never think of any person as being so different from us... that they would not thirst for the same water as we do. And we must never think of any place as God-forsaken.

The second truth we learn from this woman’s words is that though OUR faith may be tentative... OUR belief may be filled with questions... and OUR Christian walk may not be as mature as it could be... STILL we, like her, can say to others, “Come and see!”⁴ We, like her, can tell what we know to be true... We, like her, can be effective witnesses to the One whom we have met face to face... the One who has told us everything we have ever done... the One who has given us living water so that we might not ever thirst again.

Charge

Toward the end of the story, John includes an intriguing detail – he tells us that after her conversations with Jesus, the woman leaves her water jar at the well... she leaves her jar by the well and goes back to the city. Well, that got me wondering why? Why would she go off and leave something so important to her survival as her water jar? Maybe she was just in a hurry to share her news... or maybe she didn’t need it any longer since she now had drunk of living water. Perhaps she had known she would return to the well because her story wasn’t yet finished... or perhaps even she herself had become a vessel for the gospel. Whatever the reason, I think her leaving her water jar can be an image for us. Because many of us are like the Samaritan woman – our faith is tentative... our questions are numerous... and our level of maturity in Christ leaves something to be desired. Yet, she did what she could with the faith that she had... she simply told the folks in her city about Jesus... and invited them to come and see for themselves. And that’s all any of us are asked to do... to do what we can with the faith that we have... to tell the folks in our city about Jesus... to tell the story that we have and invite them to come and see for themselves. So maybe this week you might have an opportunity to do that... to just share your faith – your tentative, uncertain, questioning, immature faith – with someone else. Because you can be sure that THEY, like YOU, are ultimately searching for the water that Christ provides... living water... that will satisfy their thirst.

³ Tom Wright in *John for Everyone* (WJK,2002), p.49.

⁴ Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus* (WJK,2007), p.36.