

“Meeting at the Well”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 30, 2022

4th Sunday of Epiphany

Psalm 42:1-3, 9-11

Rev. John Wahl

John 4:5-26

I do not take very good care of my reading glasses; it seems like each time I take them off and look at them, there are more smudges and fingerprints. When life is viewed through smudgy lenses, you miss important details; things can be unclear.

Sometimes, when we look at biblical stories, we use a smudgy set of lenses: preconceived notions that can cloud our perception. This story of the Samaritan Woman at the Well is one of those smudgy-lens stories. So, before we dive in and take a look, let's clean off some of those fingerprints.

What this is not: the story of a “shady lady” that goes to the well in the middle of the day because her bad reputation has made her an outcast from society; and Jesus, the hero, calling her away from a sinful lifestyle by offering her living water. Convicted and convinced, she repents and converts; and is washed clean.

Interpreters have offered lots of explanations and judgments about this five-times married woman. But the fact is that, in those times, women were given little control over their marriages. They were at the mercy of their husbands who could divorce for any reason, or no reason at all. Unable to inherit, to hold property, or to work, women without husbands had to rely on charity; they had no other choice. So, the five-time married state of this woman cannot be laid at her feet. And her current state of living with a man who was not her husband might have been the only way for her to survive.

What this story might, instead, be: a Samaritan woman – strong and determined, despite her circumstances – becomes an example of someone who crosses boundaries to encounter Jesus in a genuine way. Refusing easy answers, her conversation with Jesus presents a powerful image of who Jesus is: a tired man without a bucket who is asking for a drink; also, the giver of water for life, abundant and eternal, who is Savior for the world.¹

¹ Lindsey Jodrey from *WorkingPreacher.com*

John's story of the encounter between the Samaritan and Jesus, in chapter four, stands in contrast to the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, in chapter three. It is, indeed, a tale of two disciples: one a Jew, the other a Samaritan; one a leader, the other a day-laborer; one a man, the other a woman; one named, the other left unnamed; one who comes in the shadow of night, the other at noon, when the sun is at its highest point.

To say, as our text does, that Jews and Samaritans did not associate with each other is an understatement. The fact is, they normally would have nothing to do with each other, much less sit and have a conversation. Given the risk of an encounter, which would render someone ritually unclean, most Jews – traveling from Jerusalem, in the south, to Galilee, to the north – would have gone out of their way to avoid traveling through Samaria, the most direct route.

Karoline Lewis calls this part of the story “the discomfort:” it is a hot and dusty day, Jesus is tired and thirsty from his long travels, he is in an unfamiliar land. The Samaritan woman sees a Jewish man, sitting alone, at the well. There is nowhere for her to hide. The initial words in the conversation are a spoken request by Jesus; he needs water but has no bucket, and she has what he needs. Later, he will offer the living water that she needs. She will ask for it because she does not want to thirst, or ever come to the well, again. In this conversation, both Jesus and woman are honest enough to tell one another what they need, as uncomfortable as it might be. Despite the historically-imposed divide between them, they are willing to be vulnerable and truthful; to allow one another to meet their deepest needs.²

We find ourselves in uncomfortable territory today. After two years of this pandemic, so many of our lives have been altered by trauma, isolation, and loss. So many things that we have expected or hoped for have been postponed, canceled or changed. New dividing lines have been formed or revealed. We have been forced to move into new places – in the ways we work and worship, teach and learn, shop and dine and celebrate – into our own kind of Samaria: a foreign place of uncertainty and discomfort.

Jesus chooses to cross over the boundary that few other Jews would dare – or had any desire – to navigate. In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus declared himself the One given to show God's love to the world, so that *everyone* who believes in him may have eternal life. And this *everyone* includes the Samaritans.³

² Karoline Lewis, *John*, Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries, p. 56

³ Barb Hedges Goettl, “Cool, Clear Water”

This story takes place at the well of Jacob: a common ancestor for both the Samaritan woman and Jesus. In the Old Testament, wells are the site for betrothal stories: where Jacob met Rachel, Isaac met Rebekah, and Moses met his wife, Zipporah. John's readers surely would have caught on to this theme as, here, Jesus and the woman with no husband meet – alone, just the two of them – and discuss what it means to be in loving relationship with God. Here, the Samaritan crosses over the boundaries of gender, religion, and discomfort to welcome someone who is a stranger in her land.

The moment when Jesus asks the woman to go and get her husband has so often been misunderstood. Jesus is not demeaning her, he is not passing judgment; instead, he is telling her that he knows who she is; that – in the brightness of the daylight – he can see all her misfortune and pain. Just as Jesus, himself, was parched, he knows that she is thirsty as well: not for yet another flawed betrothal in an oppressive system of marriage, but to be engaged in a different type of relationship. Rather than being a dependent, a charity case, she will be transformed by this new relationship into a witness for Christ: one who shares the love of God with her people.

She now knows – because Jesus knows all these things about her – that he is a prophet. He talks to her like she's a person; worth noticing, addressing, and having a conversation and a relationship with. This recognition allows their conversation to move to a deeper level. Where, she wants to him to tell her, is the location of the proper place for worship: is it in Jerusalem or Samaria, on this side of the boundary line or the other?

Jesus invites her to see that there is no need for a Temple – or to choose which Temple to give your devotion – in order to be in relationship with God. In Jesus, God elected to dwell with us, to live among us. In doing so, God chooses to come to us like a stranger in a foreign land, like a thirsty person needing a cool drink of water, like a person knowing everything about us – the good, the bad, and the ugly – accepting and loving us anyways.

This mysterious detail about the woman leaving her water jar at the well is too intriguing to ignore. Maybe she was just distracted and forgot it. Maybe she was planning to come back and get it later. Or, maybe, it was a burden that she could now leave behind, freeing her to take on her new role as a witness to Christ.

Or, maybe, there is another meaning. If we clean the smudges off our lenses and look at this story with fresh eyes, maybe we will see that this woman, this disciple, leaves her water jar as a gift. Jesus and his disciples – who return to the

well from the city – are going to get thirsty again. Their ministry will lead them through many unfamiliar lands; they will need to draw from other wells.

And here is a woman who can provide for what they will need. The stories of Jesus are so often centered around the provision of needs: wine at a wedding, food in a desert, and protection for a flock. As followers of the way of Jesus, we are likewise called to be providers in the face of need: whether giving comfort to the sick or grieving, or welcome to the stranger, or compassion to those in the midst of discomfort and uncertainty. There may never be, in our lifespans, another time when people are more in need; we might never again see and experience such levels of loss, trauma, and isolation. These needs can make people feel like strangers even to themselves; as if living in a land they don't even know.

We may not believe we have enough things – or the right thing – to give. But, if we are willing to wipe the smudges off our lenses, we'll see that maybe even a little thing – like a cup of water, offered in love – can be the beginning of a journey to salvation. Here, Jesus is the one who is thirsty and cannot get a drink by himself. In asking the woman to give him a drink, he gives her the chance to see the face of Christ in a stranger.⁴

What could we do: provide a meal, purchase a blanket, write a note, send an emoji (if that's your thing)? Then, what – or whom – will we see?

People of God, as we prepare to meet today as a congregation – to elect new leaders and consider ministry and mission priorities for the church – let us drink from the living water that Jesus offers us; and remember our calling to love the world – neighbors and strangers alike – as God so loves us. Amen.

⁴ Anna Carter Florence in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vol. 2