

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church
Third Sunday in lent
March 19, 2017
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AT THE WELL

John 4:5–42

From my perspective, probably inadequate, I have come to believe that for the most part preachers have done a disservice to this wonderful story of the Samaritan Woman at the Well by painting the woman as an immoral woman of the world. These preachers have heard the woman say, “I have no husband,” and the words of Jesus in reply, “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,” and they have come to the conclusion that this woman was living a promiscuous and immoral life. And so they have seen this story as a story of moral transformation. An immoral woman in the presence of Jesus becomes an upright woman who then leads her townspeople to Jesus. But to paint her as an immoral woman of the world may be wrong in the first place. Jesus never once asks her to repent of her sins and change her ways. He simply reveals to her the truth about her life. And the truth may well be that her life has been tragic. She may have been widowed five times and now must depend upon yet another man. And if her present relationship was with the brother of a husband who had died, according to Levirate law, she did not need to be married to the man with whom she is living. We do know that widows in Jesus’ day had little value in the society and no standing in the community, and so she may have been forced into a life over which she had little control. Jesus does not judge her. He simply reveals to her the truth of her circumstances and as a result she comes to see Jesus as a prophet. He receives her just as she is, and as for her, she experiences a renewal in the depths of her being.

So let us not moralize this story. We need to remember that Christianity is not a system of morality. Yes, Christian faith does have ethical consequences, but we shortchange our Christian faith if we see it as a moral system. Christian faith is most essentially a trust in God and in God’s leading in our lives. This is what happens to the Samaritan woman at the well. She moves towards a deep trust in Jesus as the Christ, and therefore a deep trust in God and God’s leading in her life. If we see the story as only a

tale of morality, we will never be able to relate the story to our own lives and our own need to place our trust in God in the depths of our own lives.

For you and I so very often misplace our trust. As we who are participating in this year's Lenten Study are discovering in reading Henri Nouwen's little book, "The Life of the Beloved," much of the time we place our trust in how others see us, and in how the world regards us, and how we see ourselves, rather than in how God regards us. We take our cues from the world rather than from God, and as a result, we are always subject to the way the world judges us, whether or not our parents and friends approve of us, whether or not we are successful and prosperous and important in the eyes of the world, whether or not we are in control of our lives and our destiny. We misplace our allegiances and our trust, for when it comes down to it, the world can easily do us in, and as for our parents and our friends, without their even knowing it they can cause us to reject ourselves as unworthy and inadequate.

But God does not regard us in the same way. In God's sight our lives are precious. We are God's beloved sons and daughters, and not only we ourselves, but also everyone else in the world. In God's sight we are created, in the words of the 8th Psalm, as "a little lower than God and crowned with glory and honor." (Ps 8:5) God grants us a human dignity beyond measure.

That is what the Samaritan woman at the well came to understand. Jesus led her to get in touch with her inner being where she could understand, appreciate, and begin to receive her human dignity as God's beloved daughter. No longer did she need to be defined by the circumstances of her life, her widowhood and the precarious position she held in her society.

But there is more. Besides her dependency upon the circumstances of her life, she as a religious person was also defined by the religious practices of her tradition. We know that there was separation and enmity between Samaritans and Jews because of past conflicts. Samaritans worshipped on Mount Gerizim, whereas Jews worshiped at the Jerusalem temple. When she asks Jesus about this, he leads her to get underneath all religious practices by saying to her that the time was coming when true worshipers would worship God in spirit and in truth. A particular place does not define worship. Nor do certain practices. What is important is that we worship in spirit and in truth.

Religious practices can be as much on the surface of our lives as the circumstances surrounding our lives. We can come to church, say our prayers, read our Bible, and still not know ourselves deep within ourselves as God's beloved people. We can go through religious motions and still not be at peace with God or with ourselves. We can still be filled with self-rejection rather than the kind of self-affirmation that can withstand all the negative messages we receive from the world around us.

The Samaritan woman at the well begins to get in touch with the deeper dimensions of her faith. She begins to understand that how we practice religion matters little if we do not know ourselves as God's beloved.

There are some lovely dimensions to this story told by the writer of John's Gospel. Since this story occurs just after the story of Nicodemus, we cannot help but contrast the two. Nicodemus is a named leader of the Jews. The Samaritan woman is unnamed. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. The Samaritan woman approaches Jesus in bright full daylight. Nicodemus leaves Jesus questioning. The Samaritan woman leaves Jesus having begun her journey towards transformation, and goes into the city to tell everyone about him. She invites them to come and meet the one who knows everything that she has ever done, the one who might be the Messiah. Her testimony is enough for them. They themselves go to meet Jesus and the storyteller tells us that they came to "believe" in him.

I like the idea that the Samaritan woman begins the process of inner transformation, but that she does not complete the process. She still wonders whether this Jesus might be the Messiah. Transformation in the Gospel of John is not a one-time event. It's ongoing. The decision to believe must take place again and again and again. I like that. It keeps the life of believing from becoming stale and conventional. John never uses the word "belief" in the Gospel. Believing can never be reduced to a noun. It's too dynamic and fluid and ongoing to be objectified. It must always be a verb.

I also like our Gospel writer's customary use of double meanings. The Samaritan woman is focused on the literal meaning of water, whereas Jesus speaks of water metaphorically—he offers not literal water but "living water." The water Jesus offers is a wellspring to eternal life. When the Samaritan woman leaves her water jar at the well before taking off for the city, she is leaving behind her old life with all of its literal, surface

dimensions and pursues the living water and a deeper life in the Spirit that Jesus has offered her. How wonderful!

The story of the Samaritan Woman at the Well is a story of transformation, and I trust that we will relate to the story in the context of our own lives. I trust that we will all be able to live into the life and dignity God grants us as human beings. I trust that all of us will continue to take the journey inward and reflect upon God's deep love for us beneath the circumstances of our lives and arrive again and again at that place where we can come to know ourselves as God's beloved sons and daughters.

This journey is never really completed, for we must all face the chance and change that life brings. In each new circumstance, we must set forth again, and journey inward to once more discover our belovedness as God's sons and daughters. For it is only then that we can face life with courage and strength, and go forth to share the good news of God's love and care for all whom we meet.

God grant us the grace so to do. Amen.