

March 19, 2017

John 4:5-42

Who is this with the Samaritan woman at the well?

This week's story from the gospel of John is very different from last week's story in chapter 3. Last week, Nicodemus, the important religious scholar, was visiting Jesus in the dark of night. This week, a not-so-unimportant Samaritan woman is with Jesus in the light of day. The difference between these two stories is literally night and day. For a reason. Because no matter who we are, be it Nicodemus or the Samaritan woman, Jesus is with us. No matter who we are and how others see us, Jesus sees us and loves us.

Today our story takes place in the light. It is noon. The sun is out. The world is bright. There are no shadows to hide in. No dark corners of confusion or shady spots for shady business. Everything is visible here. Everything can be seen in the light. It's the opposite of where we were last week with Nicodemus in the dark. Today we can see clearly that we are with a woman at a well in a Samaritan city.

We can see that, right? Because it is noon, the Bible says. The sun is blazing down. We can see that Jesus has stopped to take a rest. And we

can see that Jesus is a little out of place there in the Samaritan town. He sticks out like a sore thumb. We can see that because we know from the Bible that Jews like Jesus didn't hang around with Samaritans. Jews like Jesus didn't socialize with Samaritans. They didn't eat with them or drink with them or talk with them. Samaritans were not like Jews. And Jews were not like Samaritans. And according to the Bible, it had been that way for hundreds of years. Ever since 600BC when the Babylonian armies had marched into Jerusalem and kidnapped the all the important Jewish leaders and their families. They took them away into exile in Babylon for 80 years. But there were some Jews that were left behind in the land of Israel. And they had to put things back together. They built a new life. They built a new temple. They had to make do. They had to adapt. Maybe you know what that's like, to have to adapt when your world falls apart. To have to start again and reinvent everything because you have to keep going.

That's what the Jews who were left behind had to do, they had to adapt and keep going. But when those in exile returned, they did not embrace their long-lost relatives. They were horrified by how different they had

become. Their communities were different. Their practices were different. Their temple was different. To the Jews returning home, these ‘Samaritans’ were too different to be with them. And yet in our story today, there is Jesus in their community, as if that’s where he’s supposed to be. As if he is supposed to be with the adapters and the re-inventers and the ones who have to make do.

Jesus is there at the well in a Samaritan town. And here comes a woman to draw water from the well. And Jesus is thirsty. So he says to her, give me a drink. And you’d think that she would just give him a drink. That it would be easy enough for her to lower the jar into the well and be gracious and get him some water. You’d think that she would have learned in Sunday school that when someone is thirsty, you give them a drink. But this woman sees Jesus, a Jewish man; she sees him and she thinks she knows him and she says, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”

See, she thinks she knows Jesus. It is noon, the middle of the day and she thinks she sees him and knows all about him. Maybe that has happened to you before. Someone sees you and they think they know

you. They see the outside of you and the things they assume you are and the things they think they understand about you. They see you and they see a young person—too young to really know about life! They see an old person—too old to be interesting. They see a man—who could probably move some furniture. Or a woman—who probably doesn't care for math or science. You are a Prius. You are a dually pickup truck. You are a blue collar worker. You are a suit and tie. You are a pair of sweatpants and a tattoo. You are a Mexican, an Asian, a member of the white establishment. People see you and they think they know you. They think they know who you are and what you are about. But they don't. They don't know you or see YOU at all.

How is it that YOU, a Jew--ask a drink of ME--a woman of Samaria? Doesn't Jesus see HER? He is a Jewish man. SHE is Samaritan woman. Everybody knows about men and women. Everyone knows they are different. Men tend to the business of the world. Men are in charge of intellectual matters and spiritual matters. Women are in charge of the home. HE is a man. SHE is a woman. They don't talk to each other unless this is a boy meets girl story. Like the Old Testament, where boy

meets girl at the well. Like Isaac and Rebecca. And Jacob and Rachael.

At the well that's where it happens. The man asks for a drink. The woman giggles. The man smiles. And they live happily ever after. That's how it goes for a man and a woman at a well. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a WOMAN of Samaria?" Can't Jesus see that this is inappropriate? That she is an unaccompanied female? That they are at the well together? The sun is out. It's the middle of the day. She can see him for goodness' sake. Why can't he see her?

But Jesus can see this woman. He can see who she is, though we don't even know her name. Jesus sees that she is more than the labels and the caricatures. That she is smart and that she is direct and that she has had to make do with life and that she is thirsty. Jesus is the one asking for a drink, but she is the one who is parched. Because she has had to adapt and adjust and re-invent constantly. Because she has been left behind so often that she has learned to do without and to endure, as a woman, as a Samaritan. We can hear it in her conversation with Jesus. "Don't you see me?" she asks. "Don't you see who it is that you are asking for water?," "Well, if you knew who YOU were talking to, you'd ask ME for water,"

Jesus replies. “So, you’ve got water,” asks the woman, “Well, where’s your bucket? Are you like our ancestor Jacob? Can you create a well too?” Jesus replies: “If you drank my water, you’d never be thirsty again.” “Well, great!” says the woman. “Sign me up! Then I won’t have to visit this well anymore.” To me, the woman’s voice is heavy with sarcasm. And the weary defensiveness she lives by.

Everyone thinks they know her. She is a Samaritan. She is a woman. “Go get your husband,” Jesus says. But before she replies, we know what she’s going to say. We could have guessed it. She’s had five husbands and she is living with another who is not her husband. And in the bright sun, we see this woman and we think we know her. She is arrogant. She is sinful. She is immoral. So many commentaries and sermons about this woman sound like gossip columns. Because people see this woman. And they think they know her.

But do they? Do they know what it’s like to live in a culture where women were dependent on men? Where women belonged to their husbands or fathers. Where five husbands had promised to provide for her and five times she had been left behind. Maybe one or more

husbands died. Maybe one divorced her because she couldn't have children. Maybe another divorced her because she was a bad cook. Men could do that. Men could discard women at the drop of a hat. And there was little she could do about it. Except adapt and make do with a man who is not her husband won't committed to her legally. When you live a life of being left behind, you adapt and make do.

This Samaritan woman knows how others see her. That they see a failure. And a disaster and a woman who can't keep a husband. And that she isn't important and she doesn't matter. But Jesus sees her. He sees her worth and her value. He senses her spiritual thirst. And the same patterns she keeps repeating. And the same cycles of abuse. The same water that she keeps drawing from that same well every day. The same stale stagnant water of doubt and self-hatred. Jesus sees this woman and he knows she is thirsty. And he wants her to have living water for once. To know that she deserve it and that God sees her and that she matters and that all she needs is spirit and truth to be worthy of God. She isn't just a woman or a Samaritan. She is an evangelist. She is a preacher. She can have in her that spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

Jesus sees who we are. He sees that we are thirsty. No matter what we look like or who we seem to be or who we have to be. On the inside, we are thirsty for life, for grace and truth, for the living water of the Spirit. But we settle for so much less. We settle for stagnant water from the same well. We settle for the same habits. And the same behaviors. The same excuses. “I’m not important. I’m not worth it. I don’t have much to offer.” We settle for entertainment. Or isolation. Or getting as much as we can. And we aren’t filled. We aren’t refreshed. We are still thirsty. We are all thirsty for the living water of spirit and truth. We are thirsty, all of us, for life. For health, for freedom, for joy. For the God that sees us and knows us and says that we belong. We are all thirsty, no matter who we are or what we look like. Whether we are male or female; Jew or Samaritan; Yankee or Southern by the grace of God. We are all thirsty.¹ And Jesus is thirsty too. He is thirsty, like us, for justice. For mercy. For the kingdom of God. For us to be reconciled and to belong to God again. I’m thirsty, he says to the woman. ‘I am thirsty’,

¹ The Very Rev. Samuel G Candler, http://day1.org/1084-honey_you_better_believe_he_is_the_messiah

he says on the cross. As he drinks the cup of suffering, as he drinks the cup of broken promises, as he drinks the cup of death, so we don't have to drink it any more. So we won't be left behind. So we won't have to make do. Jesus promises to be with us always. I see you. I know you. I love you from here to eternity.

This week at Presbytery, I heard a story about how the 1st Presby church in Winchester has been holding improv acting classes for those experiencing homelessness or addiction issues. The improv classes are full of people who have made bad choices but they are also full of laughter and connection and communication. And there was a man and woman who met in the class, and they wanted to get married. So they asked if the church would let them have a simple ceremony there. They said their families wouldn't be coming. It would probably just be them. But they knew how it would look to people, so they understood if the church said no. But the church said yes and the women's group cut flowers from their yards. And they put together a reception. And they gathered around them at the ceremony so you could hardly tell that there was no family there. Because there was family there. The family of God.

No matter who we are, or how others see us, or how we see ourselves,
God sees us. God knows us. God loves us. In Jesus, we have a spring of
water gushing up to eternal life.