

At the Water Hole

John 4:5-42

3rd Sunday in Lent

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West Union, IA

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Gospel Reading

For our reading this morning, we continue in the gospel of John. This reading, like the story of Nicodemus last week, is found only in the John's gospel. Jesus has been in Jerusalem, but now leaves for Galilee. The verse before our reading says: "but he had to go through Samaria." The need to go through Samaria, an area that most Jews would avoid, is twofold. First, it is the shortest route. It would be possible to go around, but that would take significantly longer. Second, in the original text, 'had to' is a divine imperative. Meaning that it was necessary for Jesus to pass through Samaria. It was God's will that Jesus pass through Samaria.

At the end of our reading last week we heard: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." In John's gospel, this is the first time Jesus ventures out of Judaea, the beginning of his mission outside of Israel. It was necessary for Jesus to go through Samaria if he was to save the world.

Hear now our reading from John, chapter 4, verses 5 through 42. It is a long reading, so hang in there:

⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A 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.)

⁹ The 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.)

¹⁰ Jesus 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."

¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but 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."

¹⁵ The 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."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."

¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet."

²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

²⁵ The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

²⁷ Just 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?"

²⁸ Then 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?"

³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something."

³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about."

³³ So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?"

³⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵ Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.

³⁷ For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.'

³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done."

⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

The tension in this story is the social and ethnic differences between Jesus and the woman he encounters at the well. Jew and Samaritan, man and woman. The woman recognizes Jesus as a Jewish man right away and shows concern that he would ask her, a Samaritan woman, for a drink of water. The evangelist parenthetically informs us that, "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans." In truth, this is an understatement of the prejudice between the two groups. On top of this, no man would approach and talk to a woman in public let alone ask her to provide him with some water. Yet Jesus, in the middle of the day, at a public gathering place, a well, asks this Samaritan woman for a drink of water.

Water is at the center of their encounter both physically and metaphorically. From the woman's point of view, and the reader's, it appears that she has the water to offer Jesus, but as the story unfolds, Jesus also has water to offer. The woman can give Jesus well water, but Jesus can provide "living water." The water that the woman can give Jesus would quench his momentary thirst, but those who drink of the living water will never be thirsty again. It will, "become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Initially, it appears like the Samaritan woman, like Nicodemus before her, is going to misunderstand what Jesus has to offer her. She says, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." For her, to never thirst, would mean not having to come to the well day after day. Her understanding of what Jesus offers is limited to actual water, but unlike Nicodemus, she continues to engage with Jesus.

Through her conversation with Jesus, the woman grows in understanding. She recognizes him first as a prophet, and finally comes to understand that he might be the Messiah. In the end, she returns to her village and testifies to all who will hear her: "Come and see." Come and see are the same words Jesus used to call the first disciples in John. They are the same words that Philip used to get Nathanael to come to Jesus.

To place the unnamed Samaritan woman in the saintly company of Peter, Philip, and Nathanael is to watch the long-standing barriers of race and gender fall and the reconciling message of Christ to rise.

This story from John is rich in theological proclamation. There are many paths of understanding buried in these verses, but at the heart of this story is reconciliation. The centuries long prejudice between Jews and Samaritans collapses as the woman brings her villagers to see Jesus, and Jesus spends two days with them. Afterward, many more believed in the Son of Man, and in the end, they can proclaim to the woman: "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

In the first century, there were several reasons to separate Jesus from the woman at the well. Nationality, gender, and religion were the forces that would keep them apart,

but it was Jesus, the one sent from God, that brought them together. In our society there are many factors that push people apart: race, nationality, language, immigration status, gender and gender identification, culture, wealth and poverty, politics, religion, and there seem to be more and more on the horizon. But what are the forces that draw us together? Granted, at times it seems that there may be none, but this reading from the Gospel of John tells us that Jesus, the one who God sent to the world, not to condemn the world, but to save it, is the one who opposes that which separates us and draws us together, bridging the divides that keep us apart.

As Christians, we are conditioned to think that we are like Jesus. That we, then, are the ones who are charged with reaching out to the "others" in the world; all those others that I mentioned before. But we should also be prepared to realize that it may be us who are the "others." We are the ones cast in the role of "other" in this world, and Jesus is reaching out to speak to us; to bridge the gap between us. And, we should be open to the chance that there may be someone, reaching out on his behalf to us, as "other."

Let us pray:

Loving God, your mercy and care for all your children is a model for us to reach out to the others in our lives. To be the bridge between us and your children of kinds.

Remembering how your Son is the savior of all who turn to him, we give you thanks the we are among your chosen and saved.

AMEN.