

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's gospel reading continues the theme of discipleship which we began to consider last week in the story of *Nicodemus*. Here, it is the unnamed *Samaritan woman at the well* who is featured. The two stories provide a nice contrast between *two prospective disciples*. Nicodemus is not convinced by the words of Jesus and – at least for the time being -- goes on his way. By comparison, the Samaritan woman, who is not even a Jew, believes Jesus and witnesses to her entire village. John seems to be telling us that it will ever be thus in seeking faithful disciples: with some, Jesus will succeed; with others, he will not.

The contrasts are striking: male and female; Jew and Samaritan; righteous Pharisee and immoral idolater; recognition of Jesus as being from God vs. viewing Jesus as Jew and prophet; coming at night and coming at noon (“the sixth hour” is noon in the story of the woman at the well); unknown response vs. effective witness.

But it's hard to get very far in understanding the story of the woman at the well without knowing who the Samaritans were. Briefly, they were related to the Jews ethnically, but in matters of religion they had irreconcilable differences. There were originally two groups of them: (a) the remnant of native Israelites who were *not* deported to Babylon, and (b) foreign colonists brought in from Babylonia and Media by the Assyrian conquerors to settle the land with inhabitants who would be loyal to Assyria.

The Jews and Samaritans grew apart during the period of the Exile and subsequently parted ways on theology. For example, the Jews insisted on worship at Jerusalem in proximity to Mt. Sinai. After the exile, the Samaritans put obstacles in the way of the Jewish restoration of Jerusalem which had been destroyed by conquering armies before the Jews were deported to Babylon; in the 2nd century B.C. the Samaritans helped the Syrians in their wars against the Jews. The Samaritans worshipped on Mt. Gerizim rather than in Jerusalem (on Mt. Sinai), and in 128 B.C. the Jewish high priest retaliated for the Samaritan alliance with the Syrians and burned the Samaritan temple located on their holy mount. Thus, in Jesus' day, Jews and Samaritans went out of their way to avoid one another and remained in a state of permanent tension. In going through Samaritan territory, Jesus was breaking a traditional taboo: consorting with heretics.

So, among the lessons we learn from this story, one is that Jesus has no intention of viewing outsiders as enemies just because enmity has been passed down from one generation to the next so as to make cooperation nearly impossible. In his eyes, they were still God's people even if they were not the people designated to bring his message to the nations. Jesus had come to rescue the whole world, not just one part of it. The fact that the Jews and Samaritans quarreled did not change the fact that they were fellow human beings. Indeed. In this case, they were actually distantly related with common racial and cultural origins.

So, the woman at the well would have been “an embarrassment and an anathema to pious Jews.” Which leads to an unexpected outcome: the religious one (Nicodemus the Pharisee) rejects the revelation; the “renegade (the woman at the well) receives it.”

In John’s gospel, to “see” means to “believe.” The Samaritan sees Jesus in the truest sense. She goes from nearly complete ignorance about Jesus to “an awareness that takes hold of her in an immediate way...she has journeyed from deficit to discipleship.”

Not only is she a Samaritan, she is a woman. The request of Jesus “Give me a drink” was a violation of social customs. Jews would not drink out of such a cup since Samaritans were considered unclean. It was improper for a man to speak to a woman in public. Essentially, Jesus breaks down the walls of separation between males and females and Jews and Samaritans. So, in a sense this story is really about transformations: of transforming conventional expectations by challenging the status quo.

In doing so, Jesus is continuing what he had already begun earlier in his ministry: by changing water into wine at Cana; or changing the physical Temple building into the temple of his body. He is teaching that “those born of the flesh must be *transformed* into those having been born of the Spirit.”

Traditionally, the Samaritan woman has been viewed by many interpreters as immoral because she had been married five times, but the passage does not say that she was sinful. It’s conceivable that Jesus simply sensed that she had had “a life composed of one emotional upheaval after another.” Or that emotional traumas in her background may have made it harder for her to form lasting emotional bonds.” At the time, she might well have been abandoned, because women were viewed as property. Even if she had been divorced, it could have been at the instigation of the husband which would likely have left her destitute.

Or, she could have been consigned to what were called levirate marriages in which a woman was required to marry her deceased husband’s brother to produce an heir, even if she was not considered “married” in a technical sense. And this situation was aggravated by Herod the Great who continued a pattern of colonization by settling thousands of foreigners in Samaria; if so, Jesus is here shifting the blame from the Samaritans back to their exploiters for having contributed to their current condition and their current social practices. That certainly puts an entirely different spin on the portion of the story that relates to the number of marriages the Samaritan woman has had.

So, there isn’t necessarily anything scandalous about this woman even if she has been treated in this way in the past.

Although there is a “long history of misogyny in Christian theology,” women actually played a very important role in the ministry of Jesus: they supported his work; they were present at the tomb; they were the first witnesses of the resurrection. Thus, we alter the message if we acknowledge that this

story of the Samaritan woman at the well is not so much about immorality as it is about identity. “Jesus invites her to *not* be defined by her circumstances and offers her *an identity that lifts her above her tragedy*.” And she is the first in John’s gospel to seek out others to tell them about Jesus.

It has been suggested by some scholars that this story tells us something about the Johannine community for whom the gospel was written. It may be telling us that there were a considerable number of Samaritans in that early church gathering.

And this suggests something of the diversity which characterized those early followers of Jesus. And, of course, all of this points back to the example of Jesus who is recalled in scripture as one who broadened the Jewish view of the world for whom God was preparing to send his message by means of His Covenant with the Jewish people. Jesus was overcoming exclusiveness and building community based on inclusiveness. He crossed gender boundaries and included women in the circle of the disciples. He crossed racial boundaries and broke the distinction between “chosen people” and “rejected people.” He extended the mission of the Jewish Messiah to the Samaritan people and from there to the entire world.

There is no doubt that part of the meaning of this story is that “this woman is a witness to Christ, a disciple, just as much as the male disciples” for whom Jesus would have had a natural sexual, ethnic and religious similarity and affinity. *It is little wonder, then, that the woman left her water jar and went back to the city where she told people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I’ve ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” And they then left the city and went on their way to find Jesus.*

“Many Samaritans from that city believed in (Jesus) because of the woman’s testimony...They said to the woman, ‘It is not 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 name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(Sources: Mark F. Whitters, “Discipleship in John: Four Profiles,” Word & World, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, 1998; Brian P. Stoffregen, “John 4: 5-42, 3rd Sunday in Lent A,” *Exegetical Notes*, www.crossmarks.com; David Lose, “Misogyny, Moralism and the Woman at the Well,” www.huffpost.com, Scott Hoezee, “Lent 3A, March 9, 2020,” Center for Excellence in Preaching, <https://cep.calvinseminary.edu>; “Exegetical Commentary on John 4,” *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, <https://bible.org>; Gracia Grindal, “New Sight, New Life: Lenten Gospels,” Word & World, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, 1998; Osvaldo Vena, “Commentary on John 4: 5-42,” www.workingpreacher.org; Meda Stamper, “Commentary on John 4: 5-42,” www.workingpreacher.org, 2011; Karoline Lewis, “Holy Conversations,” *Craft of Preaching*, www.workingpreacher.org, 2017; Tom Wright, *John for Everyone*, vol. 1, SPCK, London, 2002)