

## Sermon – March 12, 2023

Our gospel lesson this week again comes to us from the Gospel of John. Last week, as we come to the gospel lesson, we saw Jesus having a conversation with Nicodemus, a Pharisee. Nicodemus comes to Jesus, but he does it at night. If we remember in the Gospel of John, John loves to use the imagery of dark and light, not just about the presence of brightness and being able to see physically, but darkness and light in our understanding. We talked about being, quote unquote, “in the dark”, not understanding things and Jesus offering the light. That comes into play this week too where we hear another conversation with Jesus, but this time Jesus is the one that initiates it. He does so not at night under the cover of darkness; he does it in broad daylight at the time when the sun is the highest point above where they are, 12 noon. He does it at 12 noon. You can't be more in the light than that. Jesus comes to a well.

It's important to remember the setting in which this conversation takes place. They are not in Galilee. They are nowhere near Jerusalem. They are completely out of their element. I say they because Jesus is traveling with his disciples, and they're heading some place, but to get there they *choose* to go through Samaria. They *chose* this route. They could have, as good Jews, because the Jews did not like the Samaritans, chosen to have gone a different route to completely avoid any possibility of encountering any Samaritans. But that's not what Jesus chose to do. Jesus went through Samaria.

On the way they come to Sychar, to a place where Jacob, a Jewish ancestor, came from and made a well so that he and his family and his flock could be given the sustenance of water. At noon he comes to the well and he finds there a woman drawing water. If you were the first one to hear about this encounter you would've automatically gone, 'Wait a second. It's noon and she's coming to the well to get water. That's the hottest time of the day.' It's not the time that women usually, because it was the women's job to get water for the family, it's not the time that a woman would normally go to the well to draw water. They would do it in the early morning or in the evening when it wasn't so hot, but she chose to come at noon. So not only is she considered the “other” in society, because, in that time, women didn't have any status; they weren't considered anything. Not only was she a woman, but she was a Samaritan, which for the Jews would've made her “other”. She was coming at a time that wasn't really appropriate for women to come. Which means something probably happened in her life that she chose not to be there when others were going to be there. This woman really is on the fringes of society. Jesus comes and engages her; chooses to have conversation, to have fellowship with her.

Here's a little tidbit of Biblical history that I just learned. The well, when the Jewish people would hear about something happening near a well, especially if it was a male/female, was a place of courtship, because it's where Jacob and Rachel met. There are other instances in the Bible where that was a place of courtship, of engagement. So, to hear of a man and a woman at a well, the expectation might be that there is going to be a betrothal happening. Think about that context. Jesus is there with a woman who's not Jewish. This whole conversation would have been shocking, not what was expected or normal in either the Samaritan or the Jewish society at the time. Jesus, in engaging in fellowship and conversation, has elevated this woman to a place of worthiness. Jesus sees her in a way other refuse.

So, he begins a conversation asking her to draw water for him. The interesting thing is this conversation that he has with an unnamed Samaritan woman is the longest conversation we have of Jesus in this gospel, in any of the gospels. There must be something important about this interaction that John chose to write such a lengthy conversation. Jesus never once, in the course of that conversation, belittled this woman, but honestly seeks to help her understand. She gets confused about water because, in asking for water, he offers water. She, like Nicodemus, thinks he's doing so literally. Now he (Nichodemus) asks, “How can one be born a second time?” She's going, 'How, how can you offer me water because you have no bucket and it's really deep? It's not like you can reach down and just use your hands to give me some water.' And Jesus says, 'That's not the kind of water I'm looking to give you. I'm looking to give you a spring that's going to be within you, that will give you life always.' That confuses her because we know that we need water. We need H<sub>2</sub>O for our bodies to survive, but Jesus is offering her more than just physical nourishment. He's offering her relationship and hope and eternal life.

It's interesting because eternal life for John was shorthand not for heaven, but for a new type of being with God, a new transformation and relationship with God; that is what he's offering. As he's explains, 'Here's what I want to give you. I want to give you hope. I want to give you life. I'm going to give you something that's

not going to end once you drink it and then you have to go back for it. It's going to be with you forever.' She's filled with hope and says, 'Yes, please give me this living water.' But she also challenges the assumptions of the day. You know she says, 'You Jews, why are you talking to me? You're a man, you're Jewish. Why would you talk to me?' She even challenges, 'Your people say that we're worshiping wrong. You think that we have to go to Jerusalem to worship, but my ancestors worshipped here.' And he talks about the Messiah in a way that makes her recognize that that's what he's talking about. He never says, 'I am the Messiah.' until she says, "I know that the Messiah is coming," she recognizes that he is a prophet; and he says, "I am he." Verse 25 says, "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." Verse 26 continues, "Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'"

This is one of those *I am* statements that we hear in John. We hear, "I am the bread of life," "I am the living water," is what he is saying here. But a more literal translation is, "I am, the one speaking with you." Not "I am he," "I am." When Moses asked God, 'what do I tell the people, who do I tell the people the message is coming from?' God's response, God says, "I am who I am." In his recognition that he is the Messiah he calls himself by God's name. "I am, the one speaking to you." God is speaking to you.

We don't know what type of response she would've had because her response kind of gets interrupted, doesn't it? Because that's when the disciples come. They've been out trying to get food, and they come and they see this happening; Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman at the well. They were astonished. He's doing what you're not supposed to be doing. "But no one said, 'What do you want?' or 'Why are you speaking with her?'" I like to read between the lines sometimes. I wonder if they were thinking it. It doesn't say that they said it, but if it's in here it makes me go, 'Hmm? I wonder if that's what they were thinking.' How many times in our lives do we witness things and we've got a whole conversation going on in our heads, but we've learned to keep some things to ourselves, right? We learn eventually, as we grow into adulthood, to have what was referred to as a filter. So that not everything that we think comes out of our mouth. It's safer that way, isn't it? This is one of those times where they were probably thinking pretty hard, 'What are you doing Jesus? Why are you with her? Why are you bothering? This is an "other." This isn't somebody you're supposed to be talking to.'

It's almost like junior high, right? You know what your group is and you're not supposed to associate outside of that group. Here Jesus is breaking that unspoken expectation of 'you're not supposed to talk with people outside of your group.' I love that Jesus is saying, '*Everyone's* a part of my group. It doesn't matter that she's a woman. It doesn't matter that she's a Samaritan. It doesn't even matter that she's had five husbands,' because in the course of the conversation we find out she's had five husbands.

What were you just thinking about her? All it says is she's had five husbands, but we start to jump to assumptions about how she must've been, right? What kind of a woman she must've been. What we don't know is did they die? Was she unfaithful to them? Was there divorce? We automatically assume the worst when we hear this is a woman that's had five husbands. Maybe she was widowed five times and has lived a life of grief and separation. But we, like the disciples, don't know her background. We don't know her context. All we know is that this is the Messiah talking to somebody that he shouldn't be talking to, in our opinion. But, Jesus does what Jesus always does. He doesn't pay attention to the social norms of society. He pays attention to the fact that God loves everyone: no matter their background, no matter their status, no matter what others think of them, God loves everyone. So, Jesus, to do the ministry to which he has been called, will act in a way that may not be as accepted or as expected as what others think should happen. From that comes an evangelist. This woman is so awed that Jesus knew her background, knew that something must be different, knew that she was a woman, knew that she was at the well at noon, knew that she was a Samaritan, and still spoke with her.

Then she went back and told everybody, "Come and see." There's a good Johannine phrase. 'Come and see. This man was able to tell me about my background.' We've heard that phrase from John already. The writer says that that's what Peter invites Nathanael to come and do. 'Come and see Jesus. Come and see these things that have taken place.' It's an invitation. This story is a wonderful illustration that God uses everyone. What I love about the Samaritan woman, as we come to the end of her story, is she may have encouraged people to come and see. She may have brought them to Jesus and shared with them who Jesus was, and they may have started to get to know who Jesus was because of her; but they didn't stay with Jesus because of her. She didn't need to be the one to make them stay. She brings them to Jesus. She is with them with Jesus. They experience who Jesus is and the love of God through Jesus, and then they believe; not just because of her witness, but because they themselves have now encountered God.

It's a reminder that our role as disciples, as those who have been transformed and loved and accepted and in conversation with God, are the ones that are called to invite. We're not the ones called to convert. We're not the ones responsible for whether or not someone else follows us and believes. We are responsible for inviting them into that possibility of faith. We still live in a world of expectations, don't we? We still live in a world where there are certain roles that people are supposed to have and live within a context of those unspoken social rules. We still live in a world where there are some that don't believe that I should be doing what I'm doing, simply because of my gender. There are still people in our world that believe you have to be a certain way in order to be a valid evangelist, a speaker of God's message. We know that that's not always the case. Throughout history, throughout the Bible we see time and time again of the unexpected being the ones that Jesus uses to bring God's love and God's message to the world. They do it in different ways. The Samaritan woman, this "other" in society, wasn't continued by God to be cast off, but was seen for the valuable, loved person that she was.

We too are seen by our God as a valuable, loved person; no matter what our past was, no matter what others in society think about us, God still comes to us. God still wants to be in relationship with us. We still can do what she did and tell people about this wonderful God who 'knows my background, knows my flaws, knows that I'm not what I should be, but talks to me and loves me anyway;' and invite others to experience that. Then we can allow God to work within their hearts.

Or, we can also be like the disciples and in the back of our minds go, 'Well, I don't think that God would should do that, and I don't think that God should react in this way, and I'm not going to participate in that.' But it's our choice. No matter what our choice God still loves us, and God still works within the situations of our lives.

God used this woman to invite others into relationship. It's a ripple effect, isn't it? Jesus invited her into relationship. She invited others; her neighbors, her community and said, 'Come and see, come on.' That invitation was extended, and they believed. That ripple effect. What would our world look like if we all did what Jesus did? If we all did what the Samaritan woman did, and didn't worry about what society, said but just started seeing each other as the beloved child that God has made, and invited each other to come and know, to come and see who this wonderful God is, that knows everything about yah, and still loves you? What would our world look like?

Let us pray. Holy Lord and God, we thank you. We thank you that you give us value; that you see us as worthy of being in relationship. We thank you for the opportunities that you give to us to invite others into that kind of relationship. We thank you that you use each one of us for your glory. We ask, Lord God, that you would open our eyes to be able to invite others, to be able to share with others the gift that we have in our relationship with you; and in inviting them they may come and see and know for themselves, and find that faith that you are who you say you are. You are the I am. We pray these things in and through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.