

St. Francis Episcopal Church
The Third Sunday of Lent – John 4:5-42
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It is difficult from the perspective of twenty-first century America to appreciate just how radical this gospel reading is that relates Jesus' encounter with an unnamed Samaritan woman at a well, in the middle of the day but these three qualifiers are the key to the story—namely that she is unnamed, that she is a woman, and that she is a Samaritan. So let's try to unpack all of that.

First of all: exactly what is a Samaritan anyway? 722 years before Christ, the Assyrian army marched into the northern kingdom of Israel and conquered it. It's basically the same thing that will happen 145 years later when the Babylonia army marches into the southern kingdom of Judah and destroys the temple. In that intervening time in the north, Jews began to intermarry with their Assyrian invaders. Jews to the south looked down on them racially and religiously and saw this as an act of betrayal to the covenant. In addition to that, the Samaritans didn't see Jerusalem (and more importantly the temple which was located in Jerusalem) as central to the way they worshipped God; they worshipped God on Mt. Gerizim, a holy place in its own right in the Bible. In the book of Deuteronomy we read:

When you have crossed over the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim for the blessing of the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin. (Deuteronomy 27.12)

And then in Joshua 8.33:

All Israel, alien as well as citizen, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark in front of the levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded at the first, that they should bless the people of Israel.

Now this isn't intended as a little history lesson or a study in cultural anthropology. The point here is that there is no hatred like religious hatred and usually the more similar you are, the more you can't stand the tiny little differences in those whom you believe have veered from the true faith. From the outside it would be pretty hard to tell the difference between a Jew who worshipped in Jerusalem and a Samaritan who worshipped on Mt. Gerizim. But by Jesus' day you have had almost seven hundred years of mistrust and religious bigotry develop and between Jews and Samaritans these differences were accentuated. So John has to explain to his readers, whispering in a parenthetical comment, "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans."

To put it all another way, in spite of what we call the parable Jesus' told about the Samaritan who showed mercy to the victim of a mugging on the road to Jerusalem—no self-respecting Jew would ever want to admit that there was such a thing as a *good* Samaritan. That would be seen as an oxymoron in the same league with jumbo shrimp or government organization or Microsoft works.

OK, so are you still with me? Jews don't like Samaritans and the feeling is pretty mutual. You need to know something about that history because this woman at the well is a Samaritan.

Interestingly, the text begins by saying that “Jesus had to pass through Samaria.” What would you say if I told you that geographically he didn’t *have* to go that way at all? He could have mapquested it and found an alternative route.

Had here doesn’t mean he had no other roads he could take; *had* for John is code-language for God’s plan. Like in last week’s gospel when we heard that the Son of Man “must be lifted up.” (John 3:14) It’s the same verb: Jesus *had* to go through Samaria—he *had* to talk to this woman—because this is what he is about, and what he is about is not just as a messiah for Jews but as savior to the world. What he is about is reconciliation, which begins by breaking down social barriers that separate people and keep them apart. He just *had* to do it because it is who he is.

So they aren’t just anyplace—they are at Jacob’s well: at the place where Rebecca was recruited to marry Isaac and then in the very next generation the place where Jacob met Rachel. Not only do Jews and Samaritans not share things in common but good Jewish boys like Jesus aren’t supposed to be talking with single-women (let alone *divorced* women; let alone divorced Samaritan women) at the well. Jesus is violating all of the cultural norms here and if we don’t notice that from our distance of two thousand years then we completely miss the point.

So this text needs to be read in tandem with the encounter that precedes it: the one Jill preached on last weekend. There Jesus encounters a respected Jewish man, Nicodemus, in the middle of the night. Here Jesus encounters a suspect Samaritan woman, who is not named, in the middle of the day. We are meant to notice these differences but we are also meant to notice that they make no difference to Jesus. His encounter with this unnamed woman goes along very much the same as his encounter with Nicodemus. He meets each of them where they are; he takes their questions seriously; he engages each of them in theological discussion. That is expected with Nicodemus—a teacher of the Law but it totally shocking for someone of Jesus’ stature to engage a nameless, divorced Samaritan woman in this way. And that is why the disciples are so blown-away when they return to the well, *astonished*, John tells us. But no one had the guts to say, “what do you want?” or “why are you talking with that woman?”

There are so many ways to go with this text. We are at a well and Jesus and this woman are talking about living water, water that quenches not just your body but your soul. Jesus *is* that living water. I’m sure there are thousands of really good sermons about the content of this theological conversation and wonderful illustrations and funny stories that a really good preacher could parade out. But for me the real power of this particular story is discovered by peeling it back to get at the core—to watch Jesus and this woman sitting at Jacob’s well, having a normal conversation in a world where they aren’t supposed to ever come into contact with each other.

That energy invites transformation and healing because worlds collide here but instead of violence what we see is how old barriers can be broken down if only we are willing to take some risks. And in the process new worlds and new possibilities emerge. And I think that is very good news.

Very often when our worldviews are challenged, our initial reaction is one of fear. When people started marching in Selma, Bull Conner got the fire hoses out. Now I don’t know all that much about Bull Conner but I suspect he went to church on Sunday, although I’m certain it was an all-

white church. I imagine he sang the hymns and said the prayers. But he was way too comfortable in his own little world and he and so many others were scared out of their minds about what would happen if that world was blown out of the water, scared of what would happen if black women were allowed to sit down in the front of the bus, scared of what would happen if black men were allowed to sit down at the same lunch counter and order a BLT, scared of what would happen if little black children and little white children were in the same schools and reading the same textbooks and simply judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin.

So think that this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, and between Jesus and this Samaritan woman, has everything to do with us. Because I think Jesus just has to seek us out too—has to go to those places where there is still separation because as Paul Tillich rightly pointed out, sin is separation. Sin is all that keeps us separated from ourselves, from one another, and from God. So Jesus keeps finding people like us in the middle of Lent, in the middle of the day or the middle of the night, whether we are powerful or powerless to call us into something deeper, into the Kingdom of God where the first are last and the last are first but where all are welcome. We don't have to live our lives in such small boxes; we are invited to see the face of God in the face of the other—the stranger, the one who is not like us.

We ought to notice as well that this unnamed woman preaches the gospel. She goes and tells her friends about Jesus—offering her personal testimony in a compelling and life-giving way. She bears witness to them about the truth she has discovered in Jesus, proclaiming by word and example the good news of God in Christ. She strives for justice and peace among all people and respects the dignity of every human being—imagining a day (if you will) when little Jewish children and little Samaritan children are judged not by where they worship God but by the content of their character.

You and I are sought out to continue that work. Our encounters with Jesus—in Lent or anytime of the year—aren't meant to leave our old worlds intact; they are meant to challenge us to enter new worlds, to help create new worlds, to live more fully and more faithfully into the meaning of our Baptism. By God's amazing grace we re-discover God and neighbor in the process—a God worthy of our love, and a neighbor in need of it.