

March 12th, 2023

John 4:5-42 “Will You Give Me a Drink?”

We are in John’s gospel again for this third Sunday in Lent. Among other things, we’ve been talking about what it means to seek and develop a deeper spiritual life. This is *Year A* in the lectionary cycle which means we get to camp out in John’s gospel for a few weeks which is great, because John is all about the deeper spiritual life. Last week, we were in chapter 3 where we learned about a meeting that took place between Jesus and a religious leader named Nicodemus. This week we’re in chapter 4 where we’ll learn about a meeting Jesus had with an unnamed woman from Samaria. The differences between these two stories is quite literally night and day which is how John rolls because for him everything is all about Jesus being God’s light in a world of darkness. John makes a lot of comparisons between light and dark. So it’s no coincidence that the story of Nicodemus and the woman at the well happen almost back to back in John’s gospel. One takes place in the darkness part of the night. One takes place at high noon – the brightest part of the day. One is about a high-profile religious leader who risked his *good* reputation to see Jesus. The other is about *Jesus* taking a risk by approaching a woman with a *bad* reputation and asking her for a drink of water. So if you weren’t able to be here last Sunday my apologies for referring to last week’s lesson so much, but it’s important if we’re going to understand the *big picture* lesson here.

First of all, let’s talk about why it’s important that this story takes place in Samaria. A lot of folks don’t always understand how marginalized the Samaritans were back in biblical times. It’s probably because in modern times we use the phrase, “Good Samaritan” to describe someone who’s willing to step in and help when people are in trouble. Therefore we think, “Oh, everyone must have liked the Samaritans because they were so nice and helpful.” We see them as the Canadians of the ancient Middle East. What we don’t understand is that they were about as marginalized as a group of people could be in Jesus’ day. The mainstream religious people of the day considered the Samaritans

illegitimate. Why? Because six hundred years earlier, when the “movers and shakers” of Judah and Israel were taken captive and shipped off to Babylon, the only people who were left in the homeland were the “people of the land.” I hate to call them “rednecks” or “hillbillies” but that’s probably the best picture I can paint for you if we’re going to understand their social standing. The Samaritans were the descendants of the people who remained in what was the northern part of the divided kingdom. Even before the exile these people were cut off from Jerusalem, so they really didn’t see a need for the temple to worship God. So when the mainstream, southern, temple-centered Jews who had been in Babylon for 70 years returned home, they were all ready and excited to re-build the temple and get back to “proper” Jewish worship. But the people who remained in the homeland during the captivity said, “Nah, we’re fine without a temple. We worship God in the mountains and hills.” And those were the ones who still worshipped the God of Israel. Some of them didn’t practice Judaism at all! This caused quite a kerfuffle because the Jews who returned home were wanting to get things back to “normal” or at least to *their* definition of “normal” when it came to all the rules and traditions of temple-centered worship. The Samaritans ... these country people, really didn’t care because they managed to carve out a new way of life *apart* from the temple. Therefore, they were looked upon with contempt by those who considered themselves “legit” Jews. But the Samaritans just didn’t care.

How bad was this rift between the southern temple-worshipping Jews and the northern Samaritans? They wouldn’t even travel in each others’ territories. “Good, God-fearing temple-centered Jews” would literally go out of their way traveling in order to avoid going through the land of the Samaritans. So today we’ve got this story in John’s gospel that starts out with, “So (Jesus) came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.” John’s readers, upon hearing this, would be thinking, “Are you kidding me? Did you just say that Jesus deliberately traveled *to* the land of the Samaritans?!?” This was a big deal! And to make things downright scandalous, he approached a Samaritan woman at a religious landmark and asked her

for a drink of water in the middle of the day in plain sight of everyone. Even she was shocked. “How is it that *you*, a Jew, comes here asking *me*, a Samaritan woman, for a drink of water?” Jesus said, “Well, if you knew who I was, you’d be asking me about how to get hold of some living water.” And thus the story begins.

It almost feels like the beginning of some corny romantic comedy doesn’t it? You can almost hear the plucky piano music playing in the background of the trailer. “He was a nice Jewish boy from Galilee with a mission ... she was a girl from Samaria with some secrets from her past. But on this day, their paths crossed at Jacob’s Well.” And that would be the title of the Rom Com – “One Day at Jacob’s Well.” And of course, the trailer ends with one of them saying, “This is gonna be the beginning of a great friendship.” Does that sound a little shocking? A little too weird for church? Pastor Jesse going overboard with the movie thing again? Good, because that’s exactly how John’s audience felt when they heard this story. This is scandalous! This would never happen in “the real world.” It’s impossible. But ... with God *all* things are possible. And something equally impossible just happened with Nicodemus the Pharisee in the previous chapter. That story was weird and scandalous too. But don’t forget how last week’s scripture ended – Jesus said, “For God so *loved the world*, that he sent his only Son.” This story of the woman at the well puts that statement to the test. The *whole* world? Even the Samaritans? Yes. God’s love even extends to the Samaritans.

These stories in John are so radical that it’s hard to even comprehend. Nicodemus was a strange case for sure. But this one? This story of the Samaritan woman is mind-boggling. Pretty soon, this conversation about water turns into something else. The Samaritans looked at the mainstream Jews with as much contempt as the mainstream Jews looked at the Samaritans. There was a lot of animosity on both sides that would often break out into violence. They both thought the other side was wrong when it came to how they chose to practice their religion and work out their faith. The mainstream Jews thought the only place you could encounter God was in the temple. The Samaritans thought the

temple was an outdated, antiquated system that only the elite, stodgy old traditionalists held onto. Why put all your money and resources into building some big, elaborate temple? You've got to get the money somewhere, and most of the time it's at the expense of the poor country folk who don't have much to give. Forget the temple. You can find God on a mountain. It's free! The mainstream Jews thought that the Samaritans were too willing to throw in the towel and make compromises when it came to following tradition. They had gotten lazy and thought they could just make up their own traditions and be all willy-nilly about the rules. So this Samaritan woman, after having a conversation about the difference between the "regular" water that you find in a well and the "living" water that Jesus offers says, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. You want to call me out on how many husbands I've had? Fine. But let's address the other elephant in the room and talk about what sets you and I apart as far as our understanding of God goes. My ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but *you* say that the only place people can worship is in Jerusalem." This woman wanted to know who was right. She wanted Jesus to settle this age-old dispute between the Jews and the Samaritans. Jesus said, "Believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 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." In other words, "Pretty soon, it's not even going to matter."

Remember a few weeks ago when I said that sometimes you've got to let go of what you think you know in order to build a healthy, growing spirit-filled life? Jesus is saying that in order for God's kingdom to be realized ... in order for true spiritual growth to happen, the Samaritans have got to let go of the mountain, and the Jews need to let go of the temple. Forty years later the Jews didn't have a choice about "giving up" the temple because the Romans would destroy it anyway and the conflict between the Samaritans and the mainstream Jews would become pointless. Not that they wouldn't keep the conflict going for other

reasons, because we humans love a good grudge, but for the reason that was supposed to matter most? It's gone. You need to let go. "Let go, and let God."

There's a lot of stuff to unpack in this story. We could talk about the woman's reputation and how Jesus didn't judge her for the number of times she'd been married. We could talk about how the disciples were worried about how scandalous it looked for Jesus to be talking to a Samaritan woman. We could talk about what might have happened in the two days that Jesus spent with the Samaritans in Sychar. Those are sermons for another day though.

Since the theme for this Lenten season is "Seeking" and developing a deeper faith, I want to make one final comparison to last week's story about Nicodemus. In that story, it took a while to see the results of Nicodemus' transformation. In fact, it felt like Jesus just kind of left him in the dust and started preaching about God sending the Son into the world, but Nicodemus wasn't even mentioned until much later when he stood up for Jesus after some Pharisees were accusing him of being a false messiah. The next time he's mentioned after that was after Jesus' death when he used his privileged position to help give Jesus a decent burial. Not that it mattered three days later, but that's a story for Easter Sunday. This woman at the well? We get to see her transformation right there on the spot. Not only does she become a disciple, but she does what all disciples are supposed to do – she brought others into the fold by proclaiming the good news in word and deed. Verse 39 says, "Many Samaritans in that city believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony." Again, this transformation isn't a "one and done" deal. It opened up God's good news to an entire sub-culture of people because, "God so loved the world." And that love breaks down barriers ... when we learn to let go so that God's spirit can work in and among us.