

Jesus through the Eyes of the Samaritan Woman
Exodus 17:1-7
John 4:5-42

“Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’”

John’s set-up for the story of the Samaritan woman is brilliant, especially if you include the story of Nicodemus as part of readying us to see Jesus through her eyes. I remind you that Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, came to Jesus by night. The woman, a hybrid Jew of no account, came to Jesus at high noon. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Tired of petty bickering among his own religious crowd, Jesus leaves Judea to head home. “But,” John tells us “he had to go through Samaria.” Why “*had to go*,” I wonder? Samaria not only was out of his way, it was also rough terrain compared with the coastal route to the east or the Jordan valley to the west. As Raymond Brown notes, “Elsewhere in the Gospel the expression of necessity means that God’s will or plan is involved.” God was sending the light that enlightens *everyone* to a land and a people at enmity with his people.

When he arrives in the land, Jesus is tired and is sitting alone by Jacob’s well. According to Amy Jill Levine, John is luring us into a type of story, a story in which “boy meets girl at the well.” Here is how it goes: the future bridegroom journeys to a foreign land where he encounters a young woman at a well. One of them draws water. The girl runs home to bring news of the stranger. The stranger is invited to a meal. The betrothal is agreed to by both parties. Think Isaac meeting Rebecca, Jacob meeting Rachael, Moses meeting Zipporah. In the case of the Samaritan woman, she runs to tell the whole village and they invite Jesus to abide with them for two days. Because more than a few Samaritans were a part of John’s community, perhaps this is John’s founding story of that unlikely covenant between the Bridegroom (John the Baptist’s title for Jesus a few verses earlier) and an unlikely bride. Or not!

Enter the bride. Two things we know for sure about her. We know she is a woman. Johannine scholar Jamie Clark-Soles reminds us that she lives in a world where men have almost all the power and women next to none. Physical power, financial power, religious power, political power....All she knows is that she’s alone, unprotected and with a foreign man who is breaking established social boundaries. She’s on guard....” No doubt that is true; and yet, at the same time, the lens through which she sees as a woman is a lens of extreme vulnerability.

We also know that she is a Samaritan. Samaritans came into being when, in the late 8th century, Assyria invaded Israel, taking the wealthy and wise Jews into exile while leaving the poor and unskilled behind. Foreigners were then sent to Israel by the king of Assyria so that they might dilute the Jewish population by intermarrying, thereby preventing insurrection. Do you see where this is going? Jewish women were bedded by the people of Babylon who worshipped Succoth-benoth, the people of Cuth who worshipped Nergal, the people of Hamath who worshipped Ashima, the Avvites who worshipped Nibhaz and Tartak as well as the Sepharvites who sacrificed their children to the gods of Sepharvaim. As the writer of Second Kings put in, “So they worshipped the Lord but also served their own gods.” Were the five husbands actually the five Ba’als, the five gods worshipped by the Samaritans plus the Lord? Was Jesus addressing her sex life with his prophetic insight or was he acknowledging her syncretism, acknowledging the amalgam of gods she worshipped? The Samaritan woman’s beliefs are another lens through which she sees Jesus.

What does John want us to see of Jesus through her eyes? Here is my wild guess. I think Jesus had to go through Samaria--I think God *sent* Jesus to Samaria--because the world God so loved, the world God loved by sending his Son, will not be bounded by religion. He had to go through Samaria because without this conversation, we would see him as belonging to us, his light shining alone on us, his truth known only to us. Even though lines will harden and boundaries be drawn in the next few centuries of Christian doctrine, John’s Gospel blows through the confines of religion in ways that will never cease to blow my mind. To wit: he writes in the beginning that what came into being with the Word was life and the life was the light of *all* people. I take that to mean from the beginning, the light of God’s Word has not been limited to one time or place or people or religion. As for the end, the hope, this Good Shepherd says later in John’s Gospel, “I have sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” In between, you know that often quoted verse used to seal our possession of him: “no one comes to the Father but by me”? It unravels if

you read the rest of the story where Jesus says to Philip, in so many words, if you don't believe I am the Christ of God, "then believe me because of the works themselves."

The story of the Samaritan woman, then, is a story at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry about his conversation with one of those sheep belonging to another fold who came to the light when it was about noon at Jacob's well. This is an interfaith conversation, of sorts. With thanks to Karoline Lewis, a professor of biblical preaching at Luther Seminary, I offer four things about this conversation that may help us know and be known by people of other faiths. All four are anchored in Paul Lehmann's counsel, often repeated from this pulpit, that "To 'communicate' is not merely to 'talk to somebody--surely an idle use both of time and of the basically human in us all. 'To communicate'" he insists, "is to be in an actual relationship in which you give yourself to him and he gives himself to you."

Lewis begins by noting that this is not how most religious dialogue goes these days. Instead it is some version of "I am right. You are wrong. So there." We are living in a time when conversation needs to be cultivated and valued," she says. "Practiced and pursued. Longed for and lived. Without real conversation, we lack intimacy and understanding, connection and empathy. Without real conversation, we risk detachment and distance." I would add that this is so not only with religious dialogue but with political and racial-ethnic and economic and international dialogue. She says the church can and should be the place that helps the world glimpse "mutuality, reciprocity, and regard." Do we even remember what those qualities look like?

This conversation happens, in the first place, between two people who are vulnerable in their own ways: a first century woman alone at a well in the blazing sun and a man by himself in foreign, even hostile territory, who is also God's Son destined for the gallows. Sometimes you can choose to be vulnerable. Sometimes the circumstances of your life make you vulnerable. Sometimes vulnerability is your destiny. In response, you can spend all you are denying it or you can see the vulnerability in the threatening other that makes him, makes her no less human than you are. So it was with Jesus and the Samaritan woman. "That is where truthful conversations must start," Lewis says, "from a place of reciprocal vulnerability, from a space that recognizes that each party risks being known and being seen."

In the second place, questions that communicate "curiosity, interest in the other, a longing for understanding" are critical to conversations across boundaries. The tag line for the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia is "Dare to Understand." This theologically wired woman is full of questions for Jesus. How is it that you are even talking to me, she asks. Where do you get that water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob? In the Second Hour, we will have the privilege of participating in a conversation with Imam Abdur Razzaq Miller about how he sees Jesus as a Muslim. I suspect most of us know very little about Islam, so the questions we ask, the interest we take in Imam Miller's faith, our longing for understanding will be key. Given that he used to be a Presbyterian, he is a few steps ahead in understanding us!

Third, conversations that lead to understanding take time and, along the way, there are bound to be misunderstandings. When we cannot understand, we can do as Nicodemus did and shut down, stop asking, stop talking, disappear. But the Samaritan woman perseveres as does Jesus. She is like Jacob wrestling for a blessing and a name. At the end of the conversation, unlike Jacob at the Jabbok, she receives a name. Jesus says to her as God says to Moses at the burning bush, "I am." *Ergo eimi*. Could it also be, in the midst of that same conversation and reflected through the eyes of the Samaritan woman, Jesus came to understand the length and depth and height and breadth of the love that he was, in a way that he could not have without her?

Finally, to be engaged in a conversation such as this requires both parties to expect they will be surprised and changed—otherwise neither party is having to do with God! It is within the realm of possibility that Jesus was surprised by the woman's astonished response to him, leaving her water jar and running to tell the whole city. Given her testimony to her neighbors, we know she was surprised by Jesus. Again, her words partake of the subjunctive mood, "the mood of mystery...of faith interwoven with doubt. It's a held breath, a hand reaching out...It's humility, deference, the opposite of hubris." "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" she asks in echoes Mary's "How can this be?"

Jesus through the eyes of the vulnerable, curious, patient, expectant Samaritan woman. When was the last time you dared to understand a stranger in this way? No doubt, what we do or say, the way we bear witness to our belief in Jesus Christ may be part of God's hidden agenda with the other, but the other may also be part of God's hidden agenda with us. For if what Jesus said in John's Gospel is true, if in the end there will be one flock and one shepherd, then we ought to behave toward one another as though we were stuck with each other eternally because, in his love, we already are! Thanks be to God...maybe. Amen.