

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
March 12, 2023 – The Third Sunday of Lent  
John 4:5-42 – Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well  
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This morning we heard one of several accounts concerning Jesus' life and ministry that are found only in the Gospel of John – a rather complicated story about an encounter between Jesus and an unnamed woman at a well in Samaria. Jesus and his disciples had been in Jerusalem, but then ventured into the surrounding countryside of Judea. Jesus' disciples were baptizing people. John the Baptist was also baptizing people. The Pharisees heard about all this activity and were interested in learning more. When Jesus found out that the Pharisees were curious, he must have expected trouble. He decided to leave Judea and go to Galilee. The most direct route between Judea and Jerusalem in the south and Galilee in the north was through Samaria.

This region was inhabited by people partly descended from the northern tribes of ancient Israel. But the Samaritans had intermarried with non-Jewish people. Like the Jews, they worshipped Yahweh, and the Torah was their scripture. But the Jews and the Samaritans disagreed about worship practices and about where the center for worship should be – Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim in Samaria.

What is important for us to keep in mind when we hear this story is how startling it is that Jesus was talking to a Samaritan and a woman. Jews looked down on Samaritans. They weren't pure Jews. Ancient Jewish literature expressed divine displeasure with Samaritans and warned against Jewish contact with Samaritans. Jesus, a good Jew, should have avoided contact with any Samaritan. Not only that, he was not supposed to even greet a woman. Again, ancient Jewish literature warned men against talking much to women, even their wives! So, no wonder that both the Samaritan woman and Jesus' disciples were surprised at Jesus' long and profound conversation with the woman at the well.

As soon as their conversation begins, it is clear that Jesus and the woman are speaking on different levels. He is speaking about living water – “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” – and she's talking about buckets and how deep the well is. He is talking about salvation, and she seems to be thinking about how she might avoid some hard physical work. They don't “connect” on the subject of water. So, Jesus changes his approach, like a good teacher who sees that her students aren't “getting it.”

Jesus says, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman replies that she has no husband. Then Jesus really gets her attention, by telling her what he could not have known by ordinary means: she has had five husbands and the man she is now living with is not her husband. Amazed, she calls Jesus a prophet. In the Gospel of John stories of “miraculous” events always transform people and show them that Jesus is the Messiah. Even though Jesus tells the woman in plain words that he is the Messiah, what convinces her is the fact that he has “told her everything she has ever done.” That makes her run off and tell others about Jesus. She becomes a missionary to her own people.

This is a very rich gospel passage with many lessons for our lives as disciples of Jesus. One lesson is that Jesus' mercy and the salvation he offers human beings is not bound by human ideas of who is "in" and who is "out." Jesus has come to offer salvation to all. There is no place in God's vision of humanity for prejudice, hatred, or contempt based on someone's race, religion, or gender. What matters to Jesus is different from what matters to "the world."

Jesus cares about what is in a person, and he has an amazing ability to perceive what is in a person. In John's Gospel there are at least seven instances where Jesus knows what is in a person – from Nathanael under the fig tree to Judas Iscariot, his betrayer. The Gospel writer says about Jesus: "... he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone" (John 2:24-25). This is the point that the author of John's Gospel is making – not that Jesus was clairvoyant, but that he was able to perceive a person's true nature. This was a sign that pointed to Jesus' identity as the Son of God.

It can be comfortable to "forget" that God knows us that well! But God does know us, through and through, past and present. We affirm this on Sundays at the opening of our service in the Collect for Purity: "Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid." This is where our relationship with God begins. So when we pray, we can be honest with God about everything. We don't have to use "nice" words or just the "right" words, and there's no point in pretending that we don't have faults or that we haven't made mistakes or that we're someone we're not. God knows us. God knows our hearts.

When we are honest with God about the ways we have failed to love God and our neighbors as ourselves, we are moved to pray for God's mercy and forgiveness. And we are then open to the love and grace God wants to give us, the love and grace that have the power to transform us inside, in our hearts. When we turn to God with honesty and humility and love, God offers us the living water of salvation through Jesus Christ.

This account of the encounter between the Samaritan woman and Jesus may guide us to ask ourselves, "What about Jesus has truly captured my attention? What about my relationship with Jesus has changed my life?" It may be a particular story in the Bible. It may be a moment of prayer, when you felt Jesus speak to your heart in a deep way. There is no end to the ways that Jesus can come to us and change us. How has that happened for you?

The Samaritan woman teaches us that when we have been blessed to know Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we need to share the good news with others. We are called to draw people to Jesus, to invite them to meet Jesus and to know him, to hear his message of salvation. Like the first followers of Jesus, we are called to go out into the world with God's good news. This is very important here and now, in an unchurched culture. We are always seeking ways to welcome members of the community into our building. Consider inviting someone to join you here on Sunday mornings. Tell your friends why you are part of this parish. Spread the word as the Samaritan woman did because you have been changed by your encounter with Christ, and you want to share that blessing with others. In Jesus' name. Amen.