

3 Lent-A-SJ- Living Waters for All
John 4:5-42 3/27/11
St. John's Episcopal Church, Salisbury, CT
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If there's one thing very special about the Gospel of John, it's that its author really knows how to tell a story. Today's gospel, and the next two also, are among its most vivid and memorable stories. It's also, as we'll see, a most important story, since it says a lot about just how inclusive, rather than exclusive, our religion must be – and also about what true religion is really all about.

Before we get to the substance of the story, however, we need to note that modern scholarship has called into question whether this incident at Jacob's Well actually occurred during Jesus' lifetime. It is possible, of course, that Jesus and his disciples did stop at the well as they walked their way from Judea to Galilee, just as John's Gospel asserts, but, assuming the conversation with the Samaritan woman, and the resulting conversion experience of the people of her town, happened as reported, why, then, would Matthew have not only not mentioned the incident, but also included in his Gospel Jesus' admonition to his disciples to enter "no town of the Samaritans"? Surely, if the incident were actually fact-based (and, remember, it purportedly occurred near the beginning of his ministry), he would have seen Samaria as a wonderful mission field for his disciples to work in rather than telling them to avoid it.

Also the details of the story run so counter to the mores of both societies – that of both the Jews and the Samaritans – that it becomes even more difficult to believe that this meeting actually occurred. Regardless of its factual basis, however, the story of this encounter is so vivid and so laden with implications for what sort of religion ours ought to be that it holds an honored place in our lectionary and in our imaginations as well. Factual or not, it has a lot of truth in it. If it isn't factual, though, how did it find its way into the gospel?

Briefly, here's what scholars say. John's is by far the last gospel to have been written, at least of those that made it into our Bibles. Indeed, it may have been as much as fifteen or twenty years after the other three were written, at a time when Christian communities were forming in many places; after all, Paul wrote to various such communities, literally years, even decades, before John's Gospel was written. So the hypothesis is that the community that produced this gospel was already attracting not only many gentiles but also numerous Samaritans. Hence, this story was included as a means of legitimating the entry of a despised group into fellowship with both gentiles and Jewish Christians as well.

Now let's look at the story itself. Jesus and his disciples are, it tells us, traveling from where they have been baptizing people in the Judean countryside, back to Galilee in

the North, where, of course, Jesus' ministry began. It's noon and Jesus is tired – after all, it's a long, long walk they've been engaged in. They have arrived at Jacob's Well, which is, of course, where Jacob met and fell in love with Rachel. So the well is a place associated with the coming together of a man and a woman. It is, naturally, also a place with water, something Jesus and his disciples have been using for baptizing. So, as we read our way into the story, we already have two very important pieces of symbolism to ground the story with. Jesus is not going, like Jacob, to fall in love with the woman he meets, but something very special certainly happens between them – something the author very much wants his audience to take seriously. And what happens very much involves the image of water – perhaps even baptismal water.

It's noon, and Jesus sits by the well to rest himself. And then a Samaritan woman comes to draw water from the well. If this story weren't in the Bible, but in a movie in today's world, the image that immediately comes to my mind is an old spaghetti western by Sergio Leone with Clint Eastwood sitting there by the well. I can almost hear Enrico Morricone's iconic film score in the background. In fact, I once drove, in a car without air-conditioning, through the heart of Spain, from Madrid to Valencia in the heat of a July day looking for a place that was open at which to get something – anything – to drink, and Leone's films were actually shot in Spain; so I can really understand what happens next. Jesus, who has no bucket himself, asks her for a drink of the water she is drawing.

But there's something dramatically wrong with this picture – regardless of his thirst. First, this woman, who isn't even given a name in the story, is drawing water at noon, by herself, whereas the custom would be for a group of women to go together at sunrise or sunset, away from men, with whom it would be improper to mix in public. We know then that she is something of a pariah – apparently ostracized – forced to go draw her water in the heat of the day – by herself. And why would that be the case? Because, as Jesus assures her he already knows, she has had five husbands and is now living with a man to whom she is not married – outlandish behavior in both her own culture and Jesus' as well. And for Jesus, an itinerant Jewish Rabbi, to ask for a drink of water from someone who is both a woman, to whom he ought not even to speak in a public place, a woman whose behavior furthermore marks her as immoral, ostracized by her own people, and, most especially, a woman who also happens to be a Samaritan, a group with whom the Jewish people have had for some time a most antagonistic relationship, a group they consider to be unclean and apostate – folks that, if a Jew should have contact with one of them, would render that Jew unfit to observe his own religious obligations – for all these reasons Jesus' behavior is beyond extraordinary. It is behavior that, together with the ensuing dialogue between the woman and Jesus and what it brings to pass, has a powerful message for both the members of the community that produced this gospel story and for us as well.

First, like many other stories in all the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, that he should not only speak with this Samaritan woman but actually ask her to share a drink of

water with him is one of those indicators – like consorting with tax collectors, curing Romans, forgiving an adulterer, and accepting the ministrations of a sinner himself, as depicted in Luke’s version of his anointing – that should make it abundantly clear what ought to matter in our own lives.

Second, one of the distinguishing differences between the Samaritans and the Jews is the site of their religious observances – for the Samaritans, on Mt. Gerizim, for the Jews, at the temple in Jerusalem. But when the woman and Jesus speak of this difference he tells her that true worshippers worship the Father in spirit and truth. The place does not matter. And he informs her that he himself is the source of living water that will satisfy into eternity, perhaps a reference to the waters of baptism, through which we become part of Christ’s body. In essence he tells her – and the community for whom this is written – and us – that he, in his post-resurrection status as the glorified and risen Lord, is a replacement for any temple or other specific place of religious ritual.

Finally, third, the woman is so taken with this amazing stranger that she rushes off to her people to tell them of her encounter. In a sense, she becomes the very first Christian missionary. But our author wants to emphasize one more thing – and that is that, although many believed in Jesus because of what she told them, the Samaritans persuaded Jesus to remain with them two more days and they came to believe in him, not because of what the woman told them, but because of their own experience of hearing him themselves. Which is the gospel’s way of demonstrating that we come to be Christians not because of what we read, or what we are taught, but because of our own first-hand experience, as we open ourselves to our Lord.

And when we do open ourselves to him, we find a call to free ourselves of ethnic and religious prejudices, to open ourselves also to all those around us, whoever they may be. The coda of this wonderful story could well be Edwin Markham’s little gem of a poem from a century ago:

He drew a circle that shut me out —
 Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
 But Love and I had the wit to win:
 We drew a circle that took him in.

So might we – as Jesus himself did in his walk through Samaria – so might we also draw circles to take others in – all those we think of as hostile, or beneath us, or simply too alien to care about, all those others whom we encounter in our own journeys through life. AMEN