

Incident Beside a Well

February 27, 2005

John 4:5-42

Last week Jan told you about Nicodemus--a man in transition. Today we meet a Samaritan woman--a woman who is trapped, a woman who is thirsty. Before I read the scripture I want to impress on you just how deep the antipathy was between Jews and Samaritans. First, the Jewish ancestors of the Samaritans had married non-Jews. (Think “impure”, think “half-breed”) Second, Samaritans worshipped on Mt. Gerazim, rather than Jerusalem, and to the Jews this was blasphemy (Think of the religious disagreements and resulting hatred between Sunni and Shiite, and between Catholic and Protestant in N. Ireland) No Jew would willingly associate with a Samaritan, and, given Jewish purity laws, certainly no Jew would drink from the same pitcher as a Samaritan. I still remember the separate drinking fountains for “white” and “colored” that I grew up with in the South, and many of you remember that you could only go swimming in Redlands on the day before the pool was cleaned. Such rules would make perfect sense to the Jews.

In addition we need to remember that Jewish men, especially rabbis never talked to women in public. I’ve been told that a rabbi would even be careful not to let a woman’s shadow touch his body.

With this in mind, let us turn to the reading of this astonishing story from the gospel of John.

(Read John 4:5-42)

(Samaritan woman enters from the back of the church. She comes halfway

down the aisle and stops.)

My what a hot day! You may be wondering why I choose to draw water now, rather than in the cool of the morning. Let's just say that I'm tired of the cool reception the other women give me, and more than tired of the way they talk about me behind my back. The heat of the day is better than their cold stares.

Hmm. Someone is at the well already. It's a man, a Jewish man at that. Well, he won't bother me--he probably won't even acknowledge my presence. I'll just draw my water and be on my way.

...

What? You want me to give you a drink? But you're a Jew and I'm a Samaritan and a woman. How can you ask me for a drink?

...

You can give me living water? You don't even have a bucket and the well is deep. Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob who gave us this well?

...

"A spring of water welling up to eternal life..." That's what you offer me? (Imagine how nice it would be, not to have to come out here in the hot sun every day. Imagine how grand it would be not to have to deal with the disdain of all the other women.) Sir give me this water, so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here."

...

You want me to bring my husband? I don't have a husband.

...

Oh my, this man knows all about me. He says I've had five husbands and that the man I'm now living with isn't my husband. He knows that years

ago my father gave me in marriage, along with my rich dowry to a man three times my age. He knows we had no children when my husband died. He knows about the brother who married me, according to the law, and about his resentful wife. He knows I was still childless when that brother died. He knows about the whole series of marriages to the whole series of brothers, about the sadness of remaining childless, the loneliness of never being accepted by the brother's wives. He knows that at the youngest brother's death my stepson, son of my first husband, took my dowry and cast me out. He knows that I was destitute when Joel found me and took me in--Joel of the laughing eyes and ready smile--Joel who will not marry me because I now have nothing.

What shall I say now? Shall I tell him to mind his own business? But this man is obviously a prophet. Shall I ask him if Joel will ever marry me? Shall I ask his advice about what to do with my life? No, this is too great an opportunity. I'll ask him what I most want to know.

Sir, since you are a prophet, tell me, where should we worship God? We worship on this mountain, but you Jews worship in Jerusalem. Who is right?

...

"God is spirit and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth." So worship isn't a matter of place, but of spirit. How can I worship in spirit and truth I wonder. Oh I wish I knew more. I know the Messiah is coming, he will explain everything to us.

...

This--this is the Messiah! (Oh bother, his friends are returning, just when things are getting really interesting. I can't stay here. They'll send me away anyway. But I have to share this exciting news. I have to tell people about

this.) [She moves back up the aisle.] I've left my water jar! No matter. It's not really important--not nearly as important as the living water this man can give. Now how can I tell the people? If I say I've found the Messiah they won't believe me. But if I tell them what he knows about me, and then let them judge for themselves...

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Jesus defied all this woman's expectations--expectations about how Jews act, about how she would be treated, about what the Messiah was to be like. He turned her world upside down, and she embraced the new perspective with joy. Can we do that?

Nicodemus met Jesus at night and we don't hear about him again until the crucifixion. The Samaritan women met Jesus at noon and ran to tell others. She became a witness. She brought others to Jesus. What will we do, now that we've met Jesus?

Jesus talked with an important religious leader, and he reached out to a despised Samaritan woman. Are we willing in Jesus name not only to talk with our church friends, but also to reach across walls of prejudice to the outsider?

May God give us the grace to learn from this incident beside a well.