

This is one of the most memorable stories from the Gospel of John. It is a very long text so I'm going to focus on one part of it. My focus is the conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well. This woman at the well is one of the most notable and controversial characters in John's gospel. Let's get to know a little bit about her. Who is this mysterious unnamed Samaritan woman who appears at Jacob's well?

In the scripture from last week, Jesus encountered a man named Nicodemus, a man who not only had a name in this gospel, but a man with credentials, a man who held respect in the Jewish culture and within the Jewish hierarchy. That man was the Pharisee Nicodemus, the rabbi Nicodemus. That man was driven by curiosity?, fear?, jealousy?, we don't know. But we do know he sought Jesus out. He came to Jesus in the darkness of night and after a brief conversation with Jesus he left in the darkness of doubt.

In this story we have before us today, Jesus encounters a woman. This encounter takes place at noon, at the brightest part of the day. And in this case, it was not the woman who was seeking Jesus, it was Jesus who approached the woman. All we are told about her in the beginning is that she was from Samaria and she was coming to the well for water. When she approached the well, bucket in hand, Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."

Seems innocent enough, doesn't it? I mean, it was noon and the sun was hot and Jesus had walked all the way from Jerusalem which was a long way from this well in Samaria. The woman was suspicious, though. Jesus did not have a bucket for her to share her water and she recognized this man was a Jew. Jews never talked to Samaritans let alone ask any hospitality from them. In the conversation that ensues, Jesus shifts the focus from the apparent circumstance of retrieving water to the gift that he has to offer of living water, the gift of God's own spirit.

In the course of the conversation, Jesus reveals that he knows much about this woman; that not only is she not married to the man with whom she is currently involved but that she has in fact had five husbands before her current relationship. Does this mean that this woman has committed great sin?

Many commentators and preachers over the centuries have interpreted this text to mean just that; that the Samaritan woman was a harlot; someone who had committed carnal sin. The point that they believe the author of John's gospel is making is that God extends his grace to include everyone, including women such as this Samaritan woman; that in spite of her great sinfulness Jesus accepts her.

But other scholars read this passage differently. Scripture has so many wonderful layers to it that it can be read through many different lenses and have profound meaning in each case. Two scholars that I am familiar with, along with several others, have a different interpretation of this text. They understand the Samaritan woman to be a literary character, not a real person. As opposed to devaluing this text, I believe their interpretation enriches and enlivens this story.

Many of you know that there are two studies of Bishop John Spong's theology taking place right now here at St. John's. We're considering his lectures in the Adult Forum and one of his books in the Women's Book Study. In the Forum, we are hearing Bishop Spong's interpretation of the gospel of Matthew. In the Women's Book Group we are reading and discussing Bishop Spong's book entitled [The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic](#).¹ Bishop Spong finds that there is an effort made by the authors of Matthew's and John's gospels to

¹ Spong, John Shelby, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, Harper Collins, 2013

authenticate their experience of Jesus by linking Jesus's words and actions to the rich tradition and history of Judaism.

In my studies, I had only been made aware of the interpretation that I mentioned earlier; that the woman at the well was a harlot. But in reading the book, *The Fourth Gospel*, I found Spong's theory on this particular text, the Samaritan Woman at the Well, to be very compelling. Being aware that there were more resources available, I checked in another source from an author I know and trust. I remembered that my New Testament professor, Frances Taylor Gench, included a chapter on this text in her book, *Back to the Well*.² I discovered that Frances Gench, among others, share this same view. They believe that this character pointed beyond herself to the culture in which she lived, to her gender, and even to the rich history and tradition of Judaism.

So, according to this theory, this woman at the well is a literary construct meant to represent the Samaritan people. The author of John's gospel purposely placed this scene right after the scene where Nicodemus comes to Jesus. Nicodemus represented the Pharisees and Sadducees who could not transition their hearts and minds to the new paradigm that Jesus ushered in; they were literally in the dark. The woman at the well literally met Jesus in the light; these Samaritans were willing to see Jesus for who he really was.

Remember that John's gospel was written late in the first century, at a time when the Jewish followers of Jesus had been expelled from the synagogue. The congregation of John's church included only those Jews who had the courage to persist in this new Christ

² Gench, Frances Taylor, *Back to the Well*, Westminster John Knox, 2003

consciousness, this new understanding of God and God's relationship with his people. The congregation consisted of primarily Gentiles and some converts Samaritan converts.

Samaritans had for centuries been a separate sect of Judaism because that region had been conquered by the Assyrians in the 8th century before Christ. The Assyrians had brought colonists from five foreign nations into Syria and intermarriage ensued. The Samaritans were no longer considered pure; they were unclean and so they were forbidden to worship in Jerusalem and no orthodox, or pure, Jew could have anything to do with them. Spong's theory, and Gench affirms it, is that the five husbands of this Samaritan woman represent those five foreign nations. The Samaritans had intermarried among those nations thereby defiling them in the eyes of Jewish tradition and law. The Samaritan Woman was drawn in by Jesus invitation to recognize that he was the living water who would satisfy every thirst. We can read that as a reference to the Samaritan converts. The more they drew from the well of the living water that was Jesus, the more they felt welcomed, loved and led. And what did the author of John's gospel have the woman do when she recognized Jesus for who he was? She dropped her bucket, just as the early disciples abandoned their nets to follow Jesus, and ran to gather her people. The Samaritan converts abandoned their temple for the temple that was the body of Christ in the early church. The woman at the well proclaimed to her people, "Come and see a man who has told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" She was professing the beginning of her transformation into Christ. Transformation into Christ's way of life is meant to be done in community.

Imagine for a moment how hard it must have been for people of the early church to stay together. The powers of the world, the mega synagogues of the ancient world and the

Roman Empire, insisted that their religious view was the right religious view. But the fledgling church, believed and trusted in this new way of understanding; in this new way of living in relationship with God and each other. Like the Samaritan woman at the well, the people of the early church were witnesses to the power of Christ to give life, sustain life and redeem life. They were witnesses to Christ as the true living water.

The woman at the well needed to gather her people to be a part of the experience. She demonstrated that in order to step into this new faith experience we need our friends, we need each other. It is far too easy to get distracted. We often need to be pulled back to our center. We need to hold each other accountable.

To that end, let go of doubt and timidity about sharing the love of Christ that is in you with others. Engage in dialogue both here with each other and in the community. Develop life giving relationships with people who are in desperate need of relationship. Like the woman at the well, we can invite others to come and see! Spend an hour of the week, maybe even two or three, to engage in relational activity with the poor through Interfaith Outreach, Miriam's House, The Gateway, the Yoder Center or Meals on Wheels. Help out at the Rivermont Emergency Food Pantry. Join an environmental group to work in community for the benefit of our planet home. Come to the Forum or the Lenten Suppers to dig into life's big questions.

When we strengthen ourselves at the Holy Table God empowers us through the Holy Spirit for service in the world; the heart of the body of Christ is in us. Whenever that heart breaks open, the living water, the Spirit of God, will pour out. That water can change the world.