

The Woman at the Well

*3rd in a Lenten Series:
Heart to Heart Talks with Jesus*

from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
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John 4:1-30

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, ‘Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John’— although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink”, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’

The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’ Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.'

Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?' 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?' They left the city and were on their way to him.

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Early on in my ministry I became enamored with the tradition of religious icons. Mostly I used them in teaching and in more creative worship spaces to help the community together really imagine maybe a key biblical text or to interact with a non conventional image or metaphor for God. The icons that I have collected are modern and ancient, protestant, roman catholic, and eastern orthodox.

Living and working in the heart of the Coptic Orthodox community in Egypt gave me the opportunity to buy several new icons. I had a favorite shop in Old Cairo where the shopkeeper and I would talk about the significance of their traditional images and value of the art form.

I was especially delighted one evening while visiting St. Mark's Cathedral in Cairo, the seat of their Pope, when a friend and I stumbled upon the school where they teach artists how to create Coptic Orthodox icons. We went into their studio and saw multiple icons in progress and some more non-traditional icons where it was clear that students were playing with the art form and testing its limits.

Sitting on a table was a completed icon by one of their students that depicted the story from our Gospel lesson today: Jesus in conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. I immediately fell in love with it. She holds in her hands the water jug brought up from the village as she looks upon Jesus with wide eyes. He stands facing her with his arms outstretched probably explaining to her the theological significance of living water verses the regular water in that very

jug. The sky behind them is a band of gold leaf and the mountains and desert surrounding them are stylized in a way that your eye goes right to the interaction between this man and woman. Down in the left hand corner is the signature of the artist, Nancy, and the date, 2014.

I immediately asked the head of the school if these icons were for sale and someone called Nancy to ask her how much she wanted for it. It was so little that I can't even really remember what I actually paid, but it has become one of the most treasured pieces in my collection.

Several months later when I was back in Old Cairo at my traditional icon shop, I tried to get the owner there as excited as I was about my new icon, describing the delight I took in the visit and the uniqueness of the image itself.

And then he told me it was worthless. Worthless because the woman who painted it was no one.

I was shocked at his statement, but he went on to explain to me that the value of an icon is deeply connected to the importance and prestige of the artist.

For centuries scholars and readers of scripture have considered the woman in our gospel story to also be no one. Not even a name, like Nancy, to identify her. She is simply called the woman at the well or the Samaritan woman. Much of the point of the way this story is written centers on the reality that she was anonymous and marginal.

Biblical interpreters have often highlighted the contrasts between our Gospel lesson for last week - Nicodemus and Jesus - with our text for today. While they both bring deep and meaningful questions to their conversation with Jesus, that is where the similarities end. Nicodemus is a well known Pharisee; this a nameless woman. He is a Jew; she a Samaritan. He meets with Jesus in the dark of night; She speaks to him in the light of the noon day sun. She walks away from their meeting joyfully sharing the good news of life in Christ with her community bringing others to faith in Christ; Nicodemus only speaks up once among his colleagues and mostly keeps his devotion to Jesus to himself. Nicodemus is embarrassed to be seen speaking to Jesus, while Jesus disciples are embarrassed to see Jesus speaking with this Samaritan woman.

Her most honorable claim to fame in the biblical witness is that she engages in the longest conversation anyone ever has with Jesus of Nazareth. Their theological back and forth is dizzying as she deftly debates theological, geographical and liturgical questions of importance with Jesus, who she treats as just as anonymously as the text treats her.

Samaritans were a group of people living in northern Israel whose interpretation of the Jewish faith and traditions diverged from more traditional Judaism through centuries of exile, foreign populations living in their midst and a disconnection from the southern religious leadership in Jerusalem.

In the same way I can't exactly explain to you the real and significant difference between a Presbyterian and a Jehovah's Witness - or why I could possibly have the right to claim that they are not Christian, so too one might struggle to explain exactly why Samaritans were not allowed to claim to be Jewish. But in both instances, we - the dominant traditions - have been taught that the differences are enough to make us better and to make them marginal.

We learn as well toward the end of the story that this woman is likely marginalized in her own community because of her marital status. Some have speculated that the only reason she would be alone in the heat of the day at the well is because she was not welcome among the rest of the women of the community who would have come to draw their water early in the morning. You don't need to be an expert in ancient culture to know that there are any number of reasons why one woman might feel set apart and not welcome among another group of women.

But in spite of everything that would characterize her as marginal and as no one, Jesus engages with her deeply and earnestly, honestly and lovingly.

We have been calling this Lenten preaching series, *Heart to Heart Talks with Jesus* - and that is what these two have. But I will be honest in saying that I have never really resonated with that kind of language about how a believer can connect personally with Jesus.

As a child and even a teenager, my faith and relationship with Jesus skewed pretty academic. I knew my Bible. I knew what was expected of me in worship. I could walk you through the iconography of my childhood sanctuary. I was rooted in the Christian's calling to justice and service. I didn't really expect or need anything more.

It wasn't until I was in high school that I experienced something different. I happened to be attending a Presbyterian youth conference, the theme of which was *Through the Waters*, so each day we studied and reflected on a different significant biblical story that involved water. Of course the woman at the well and Jesus' promise of living water was included.

At this particular conference though, they decided to interpret the story of this nameless woman through the use of liturgical dance. I grew up in a church much like Bryn Mawr, where we just didn't do things like that very often. But sitting near the front of the auditorium, something shifted in my brain or in my heart that made me see this story in a new way. I had always loved the Samaritan woman as a teenager - for her feisty comebacks to Jesus' teachings and for her willingness to be bold and strong in front of her community. I really loved her for all of that. But something about seeing a real woman in front of me, a three dimensional woman, a dancer moving and engaging with Jesus, made me understand how much she loved him. And it made me want to love him too, and made me really feel for the first time I could remember that Jesus' love for me was deep and three dimensional as well.

"Come and meet a man who told me everything I have ever done," she says to her community. Come meet a man who has really known me, and seen me and loved me.

Theologian and Priest Henri Nouwen has written about what it means to know and dwell within the heart of Jesus...

Are you in love with Jesus? Perhaps another way of putting the question would be: Do you know the incarnate God? In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women to know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, cares, reaches out and wants to heal. In that heart there is no suspicion, no vindictiveness, no resentment, and not a tinge of hatred. It is a heart that wants only to give love and receive love in response. It is a heart that suffers immensely because it sees the magnitude of human pain and the great resistance to trusting the heart of God who wants to offer consolation and hope... Knowing God's heart means consistently, radically and very concretely to announce and reveal that God is love and only love, and that every time fear, isolation or despair begins to invade the human soul, this is not something that comes from God. This sounds very simple and maybe even trite, but very few people know that they are loved without any conditions or limits.¹

In this particular moment we remember that too many people have been told that they are no one. That too many people feel marginalized and isolated, too many alone and afraid. That they mistakenly believe that their value in the world's eyes and in God's eyes is limited to their importance and status in the world, much as my friend at the icon shop described.

Even this woman who has been labeled no one herself, reaches out to share the love of Christ. For many people it is only through the voice of the church, the compassion of the community and the welcome of one neighbor to another, the care of one stranger to another, that others can know the good news of the unconditional love of Christ.

While it may feel like in this moment that we have pulled back from the work of the community and this kind of love, it is expressly by being willing to make the inconvenient decisions to limit our physical contact that we can show our love for one another. An act expressly done for the sake of the vulnerable, for the sake of those whose health and wellbeing can only be protected through the compassion of the whole community.

In this moment we are called to remember what it means to love and care for those who may be forgotten, nameless in the midst of a crisis, alone in body or in spirit, to remember that we can connect and care for one another and our community in creative ways, that we can love each other even at a distance, and that we are ourselves deeply loved by Jesus Christ. May this continue to be the truth that binds our hearts to one another and binds our hearts to God. Amen.

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, Crossroads Publishing, 1989.