

Last weekend we explored an encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus from the third chapter of John's Gospel. Today, in the fourth chapter of that same gospel, we see Jesus with an unnamed Samaritan woman. John has juxtaposed these two in a way that is meant to get our attention, in a way that makes it clear that God really does so love *the world*. We are meant to notice these polarities: male and female, Jew and Samaritan, community leader and socially marginalized. Nicodemus came to Jesus in the middle of the night; this Samaritan woman comes to Jacob's well, and to Jesus, in the middle of the day.

And yet even as we notice these differences, I think that John means for us to see that Jesus meets each of them where they are, and takes their questions seriously, and engages each of them in serious theological conversation. The disciples' astonishment is a clue to us of just how shocking it was for Jesus to be talking to a divorced, Samaritan woman in the middle of the day. In first-century Palestine the rules of the game were clear: men are not supposed to speak with women to whom they are not married in public. And as John whispers to us parenthetically, "*Jews do not share cups with Samaritans.*"

722 years before the birth of Christ, the Assyrian army had marched into the northern kingdom of Israel and conquered it. In the aftermath of all that, Jews began to inter-marry with their Assyrian invaders. The purists in the south (especially the priests and temple leaders) saw this as an act of betrayal to the covenant, and looked down on these "Samaritans" racially and religiously. As if all that "impurity" wasn't bad enough, Samaritans didn't see Jerusalem (and most importantly the Temple which was located in Jerusalem) as central to the way they worshipped God. Instead they worshipped God on Mt. Gerizim, a holy place in its own right in the Bible. (See Deuteronomy 27:12)

The point here is that there is no hatred like religious hatred and usually the more similar you are, the more you can't stand the tiny little differences in those whom you believe have veered from the "true faith." That's how it was between Jews and Samaritans, who would not share even a cup. And here is Jesus, a Jew, asking for some water.

While we have basically picked up today from where we left off last week in John's gospel, the lectionary omitted this important transitional verse: "*Jesus had to pass through Samaria.*" The thing is, while that's the shortest way to where he is headed, he didn't *have* to do that at all. Most faithful Jews would have gone *around* Samaria, refusing to step foot in that land. So "*had to*" here doesn't mean that he had no alternative routes he *could* have taken. Rather, it's John's code-language for "God's plan." Jesus just *had* to do this—because God so loved the world. He just *had* to do it because it is who he is.

It's interesting to me that this encounter at Jacob's well begins with Jesus asking the woman for a drink. I can't help but to hear those words from Matthew's Gospel about the sheep and the goats echoing in my head whenever I hear this gospel reading: *when did we see you Lord? When did we not see you?* Jesus responds by saying that whenever you visited those in prison, or clothed the naked, or fed the hungry, or gave a drink of water to one of these little ones in my name, you did it to me. And whenever you *didn't* do those things, you didn't do it to me.

So before the conversation gets deep—before it turns to theological talk about “living water” that quenches a thirsty soul—Jesus is just a stranger in a foreign land asking for a drink of water. And while it’s true that Jews and Samaritans don’t share cups in common, and while it’s true that men aren’t supposed to be talking to women they aren’t related to in public, it is also true that this stranger is thirsty and far from home and this local woman has access to the well. Whatever deep theological insights emerge beyond this we should not miss the way it all begins: with an act of human kindness.

Think about the life-changing encounters you have had in your own life that began with a stranger showing kindness to you. I love the verse in Brian Wren’s great Eucharistic hymn, “I come with joy,” that says...

*As Christ breaks bread and bids us share, each proud division ends/  
That love that made us makes us one, and strangers now are friends.*

Someone needs to take a risk, if we mean for a stranger to become a friend. Before we get to profound metaphysical interpretations I think we are invited to simply watch Jesus and this woman sitting at Jacob’s well, having a normal conversation in a world where they aren’t supposed to have any contact with each other. Yet strangers become friends, and the energy that is released invites transformation and healing. Instead of walls being reinforced, bridges are being built.

Such encounters are only ever considered “dangerous” or “radical” because we have been taught to hate, and fear, and have become so accustomed to the barriers. It’s much easier to stereotype people when we make them invisible, when they represent a group rather than a particular human being.

*“He has told me everything about myself,”* the woman declares to her friends. He has known me for who I am, and He loves me for who I am. What amazing grace!

You don’t need to be a card-carrying feminist to notice that this unnamed woman is a preacher. Jesus has told her everything about herself. She, in turn, goes out and tells her friends all about Jesus, offering her personal testimony in a compelling and life-giving way that draws others in, “proclaiming by word and example the good news of God in Christ.” *And that Word is received.* She strives for justice and peace among all people and respects the dignity of every human being—imagining a day (if you will) when little Jewish children and little Samaritan children are judged not by where they worship God, but by the content of their character.

The full inclusion of women in the life of the Episcopal Church seems so obvious to us sitting here in 2011, where a woman regularly stands in the pulpit and behind the altar, and where in a few moments we’ll pray for Katherine, our Presiding Bishop. It’s no big deal and maybe this text doesn’t even feel like a very “radical” text to us.

But you don’t have to go back very far in our history—until just twenty-two years ago the House of Bishops was still a boys’ club—no girls allowed! And not very much further back than that, so

was the whole House of Deputies, both clergy and laity (and for that matter the vestry of this parish.)

I found myself wondering this week what a preacher in this very room might have said about this gospel in 1951, or even 1971. What could they see, and what could they not see, given that context? Who had ears to hear? And I found myself wondering: what can we see, and not see, today? And do we have ears to hear? Authentic human encounters like the one between Jesus and this unnamed Samaritan woman at the well reveal something about our shared humanity, and they change the conversation. Or more accurately, they make real conversations possible.

Over the past decade our denomination has been engaged in some difficult and very public conversations over the full inclusion of all the baptized in all the orders of ministry in our church. Let's be honest: there have always been gay and lesbian people in The Episcopal Church: in the pews, in our choirs, in our pulpits and standing at our altars, and yes, even in the House of Bishops. But as long as people were kept in the closet and unnamed they could be made invisible. They could be talked about, rather than with, as if they were not even in the room.

I know that we are not all of one mind in the Episcopal Church or even in this parish on these matters. But it seems to me that wherever we may find ourselves, it is always better to talk *with* one another about our differences rather than *about* one another. In today's gospel reading, it seems to me that both Jesus and this Samaritan woman are changed by this encounter. And by God's grace that is sometimes our experience too, when people get to speak their own truths in their own voices.

This encounter between Jesus and this Samaritan woman has everything to do with us, because I think Jesus just *has* to seek us out too: all of us—male and female, young and old, rich and poor, gay and straight. Jesus cares about our stories, about our lives, about the stuff everyone in town, or our church, or our family may know about us even if it is never said out loud.

Jesus just *has* to go to those places where there is still separation, because as Paul Tillich rightly pointed out, *sin is separation*. Sin is all that keeps us separated from ourselves, from one another, and from God. So Jesus keeps finding people like us in the middle of Lent, in the middle of the day or in the middle of the night. He just has to, in order to call us to something much deeper, in order to cut through all the shame and fear and guilt to tell us everything about ourselves including the truth that we are loved, and to offer us living water that quenches the deep thirst of our souls. When water like that is offered, you don't take little sips. You drink as deeply as you can.