

## “The Other Side of the Coin”

A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver for the  
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*John 4:5-26*

So [Jesus] 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 worshiped 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 worshipers 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.”

Today’s sermon passage is once again taken from the Gospel according to John. In many ways it is a companion piece to the story we read last week, the one in which Nicodemus had his nighttime encounter with Jesus. It is, to use a cliché, the other side of the coin. Two parts of a whole, but each part different, unique, having points to make to all who read Scripture.

To recap, this takes place early in John’s telling of Jesus’ ministry. Word has spread about the new teacher and the amazing things he can do. People’s interest has been piqued. In last week’s lesson, one of the curious, a teacher and leader of the Jews named Nicodemus, sought out Jesus, engaging him in dialogue, willing to discuss ideas contrary to his own, but at the end of the day not fully convince – or willing – to cast aside the life he knew to follow Jesus.

Now we have this woman at the well. As the text tells us she was not just a woman, but also a Samaritan. Today, most people think of the Good Samaritan when they think of any of his countrymen. You will recall that the Samaritans and the Jews were at loggerheads, the former believed by the latter to be heretics and usurpers. The fellow who rescued the injured traveler was called ‘Good’ because it was assumed that usually Samaritans were bad. That’s the context of this story to remember. Jesus was not only talking with a woman, he was talking with one of *them*, one of *those people*. As is so often the case in the Gospels, Jesus crossed boundaries.

Now, before we applaud the kumbaya moment in which everyone just gets along, we need to recognize that there’s tension in this exchange. There are presumptions being made. And sin is called out.

To start with, Jesus makes a demand of this foreign woman. *Give me a drink*, he says. When she asks him what he’s doing, fully aware that Jews and Samaritans usually didn’t do things together or for each other, Jesus replies with a lesson about living water, which baffles her. But here something strange begins to happen. Just as Jesus engaged Nicodemus in dialog, challenging him along the way, so to did Jesus with the woman at the well. He essentially says, “You don’t understand me.” But rather than dismiss her, he then steps into the potentially dangerous ground of her marital life. We read in the Gospel, *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!" Now, let's consider this for a moment. How on earth did Jesus know about her past marriages? How did he know about her current relationship? John doesn't tell us. Yet I think this is one of those moments when we are meant to recognize the divinity of Jesus – just as we see his humanity at the beginning of this story when we are told he arrived at the well tired. So here we have John's Jesus: fully human and fully divine.

Now this is where the story gets *really* interesting. Imagine how the woman felt when Jesus made his statement! Consider the woman's response to Jesus' words about her partners. No denial. No embarrassment. No shock. No evasion. With Jesus, she wasn't ashamed of her past, nor of her present circumstances. With her neighbors, that might have been different. She came to the well in the heat of midday, when the normal practice was to come in the cool of early morning or of later afternoon. We can surmise that she was an outcast in her own community. In the presence of Jesus, she was with someone with whom she could speak.

Jesus the stranger quickly became Jesus the prophet. Now, we know that not all prophets of the day were equal. Not all were spokespeople who delivered God's message. Perhaps she thought he was someone to whom all secrets were unknown, that he was a magus. Frankly, it doesn't matter. She was drawing closer to him – and this is in contrast to Nicodemus. She wasn't a prisoner of her learning, unable to see new possibilities, her understanding blinkered by what she knew. Simply put, she was open to the working of the Spirit in ways that were not possible with Nicodemus.

Of course, this isn't the end of the story. We have Jesus' teachings about prayer and true worship, and here he reflects the reality of the day, that Jews and Samaritans were different, the former knowing things the latter did not: *You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.* But before anybody says that Jesus is being prejudiced here, it's worth noting that he is simply stating a fact. Yes, he does identify with the Jews, which is no surprise since that is what he was. He says it is from them that salvation will come. But he then turns the table and says that knowledge will soon be obsolete, that true believers will worship in spirit and truth, not in a Jerusalem. The rituals of the temple will become obsolete and Jesus hints at what will be a world-

changing verity: that anybody who believes will be one of God's people. Here we see Jesus expanding the circle of his ministry. He was not teaching just the Jews, but all people. God was the lord of all, welcoming all.

This vignette closes with the woman confessing that she had been awaiting the messiah. Jesus then tells her that he is the Christ. In the verses that follow this passage but are part of today's reading, the woman tells her people of the amazing encounter she has had and they come to believe her. The outsiders, 'those' people, the 'them' accepted Jesus for who he was long before others, including his own, did. This is one of those stories we know so well that we are in danger of missing the remarkable thing that has happened! This woman was so open to the message of Jesus. Where Nicodemus danced around the edges of the theological pond, she waded in. The water she so desired – the living water – was given to her, just not in the form she expected. What a perfect example of receiving what we need, not necessarily what we want, from God! All too often we are too focused on our own wants and desires to the exclusion of all else. While we should be aware of this all year long, during Lent, we should be even more so. For what is this self-absorption but a sin? Is not focusing on ourselves and not God a sin?

The woman at the well could well have been lost in her situation. Most likely an outsider in her own village, living with a man not her husband, approached by a stranger making demands, she could have been bitter or angry. She could have been caught up in ruminations about the path her life had followed. Instead, she was open to Jesus and what he said and did. True, unlike Nicodemus, she did not go looking for the new teacher, the one who could work wonders. But when he wandered into her life, she was ready. She had been looking for the messiah, and when he happened to turn up on the proverbial doorstep, she opened her heart and soul to him and welcomed him in. We see how she became one of the first evangelists, telling her neighbors, who came to believe in the Christ.

Part of the wonder of this story is the equanimity with which the woman reacted to Jesus confronting her over her past and current relationships. She had self-knowledge. And it is an awareness of who we are and what we have done that is necessary if we are to have a full relationship with God. It is necessary if we are to repent. Penance is not possible if we fail to see things as they are. Penance doesn't require that we indulge in spiritual self-abuse, bemoaning how awful we

are. But it does require honesty. If we fail to see the truth, to acknowledge reality, how can we change? We know that God wants us to repent, that he is waiting for us, that indeed, he is coming to us.

Jesus broke just about every rule in this story. A man, he talked with a woman. A Jew, he engaged with a Samaritan. A teacher, he explored faith with a person of lower status. And I believe he did this to make clear the point that what he had to say, what he had to teach, was not meant for a select few, whether they be initiates or members of a particular nation. Jesus had indeed come to save everyone, and that includes you and me.

Jesus loved his Jewish brothers and sisters, his Samaritan neighbors, the Roman occupiers. Yes, he would speak hard truths to each of them, but real love includes the speaking of hard words. We must do this – with love and care – with our family, friends, and others in our community. And if we are to love ourselves, we must speak hard words to ourselves. That’s repentance. It’s not easy, but if we are to have the lives God wishes for us, if we want to enjoy the living water that Jesus spoke of, this is what we must do: reflect and repent.

We live in an age of division, when people are ever more tribal. We know as Christians that this is at odds with what God wants. When people are building walls, we are called to build bridges. When people are retreating to the safety of their own kind, we are called to be like Jesus and talk with the stranger. In this hour, when we are shutting ourselves off from others out of concern over the coronavirus, it is our duty as members of the body of Christ to make sure that we nurture our ties with one another, that when the time comes, we will be prepared to open the doors wide to any and all who wish to enter into our fellowship.

Both Nicodemus and the Woman at the Well were looking for something, but it was the latter that found God. This woman, whose name we don’t know, serves as an example to us all of what is possible in the life of faith. One doesn’t have to be a scholar, belong to the so-called ‘right’ church or people. One merely has to have an open and honest heart, a willingness to see who it is we are, and a willingness to listen for the word of God. As we see in this story, it will come to us at the most surprising moment – and at the time we most need to hear it.