

Lent 3, Yr A
March 15, 2020

Jesus talks to a woman at a well. Without miraculously curing her of disease, without declaring her absolved of sin, without even *touching* her, he frees her, transforms her into an enthusiastic evangelist, who leaves him to invite others into freedom. How does he do it? How does a very odd conversation change her life?

Consider that, under the rules followed by devout Jews - rules meant to help them be in right relationship with God - the conversation should never have taken place. When Jesus' disciples return to the well, they are astonished he is talking to a woman. A Jewish man wasn't supposed to talk to a woman who wasn't a member of his family. To make it worse, the woman was a Samaritan. Jewish tribes lived in Samaria when it was conquered by Assyria in the 8th century, *bce*. After the invasion, some Jews married Assyrians. Under those rules I was talking about, the children of such "mixed" marriages weren't considered to be Jewish. Descendants of Jewish/Assyrian marriages were Samaritans, not Jews. While Jews and Samaritans both worshipped the God of Abraham, the God who gave Moses the law on Mt. Sinai, they would *never* worship together. Jews looked down on Samaritans. As John notes, they didn't share things in common.

Jesus shouldn't have been talking to a woman, let alone a Samaritan woman. And he definitely shouldn't have been talking to a woman who had been married five times and was now with a man to whom she wasn't married. John tells us the meeting at the well took place about noon. Fetching water was woman's work, but women didn't come to the well at noon. Carrying water in clay jars was no picnic; women came in the early morning and evening – the coolest parts of the day. And they came in groups. Just as men would gather inside the city walls to trade news and gossip, the well was a place where women connected and caught up. This woman's noontime solo trip suggests she'd been shunned by her neighbors. Jesus knows why she is there alone, in the middle of the day.

What we learn about this woman in John's Gospel can be wrapped up in a few labels – "Samaritan," "woman," with a "scandalous" marital past and present. It isn't much – we don't even know her name. But it was enough for the disciples to know that a Jewish man shouldn't be in her company. She reminds me of the Scarlet Letter - all anyone believed they needed to know about Hester Prynne, was the big "A" sewn on her dress. But before we feel too superior, let's consider some of the labels we use: black/white; working/on welfare; American/immigrant; married/single; divorced/widowed; well/sick; Episcopalian/born again Christian; college educated/ged; parent/childless; liberal/conservative. . . . Is there an end to the labels by which we divide people into safe and not, respectable and not, worth our time and not; like *us* and not?

Jesus knows the labels by which the woman was known, and, being Jesus, he was going to talk to whomever he wanted, right – lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes. So, nothing new for him. But, *extraordinary* for this woman. Watch what happens to her as the conversation unfolds. First, he asks her for a drink of water. What? “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” She knows the rules. To answer, Jesus tells her about the living water *he* has to give, water that could quench her thirst forever. When she eagerly asks for it, he tells her she must first go and get her husband. She tells him the truth - she has no husband, but then Jesus tells her even more of the truth – she’s had five husbands and now is with a man not her husband. The woman can tell that Jesus is a prophet.

Now, you might think Jesus’ reciting her past and present marital status would embarrass her, that she might assume, well, no living water for me, and leave. But that isn’t what happens. Notice that Jesus had only one comment about her relationships, referring to her answer about not having a husband, he says: “What you have said is true!” No judgment, no assumptions; just the truth. Instead of embarrassed, the woman seems emboldened by Jesus knowing the truth, because she wades right into a point of contention between Jews and Samaritans - where does God reside, in the temple in Jerusalem or on the mountain where the Samaritans worship? What a cheeky woman! She listens as Jesus tells her that the Samaritans are in the dark, worshipping what they don’t know, while salvation is from the Jews.

Then Jesus tells her things, not about her past, but about the coming kingdom of God. He reveals that God isn’t held in the walls of a temple or by the sides of a mountain. God is Spirit, and everyone who believes will worship God in spirit and truth, regardless of location. Everyone, Jews and Samaritans, will worship the same. And *then* Jesus reveals who *he* is - the Messiah, the one for whom she tells him everyone has been waiting, waiting for him to tell them everything.

And then she’s gone! Forgetting why she had come, leaving her water jar behind, she returns to the city and tells everyone: “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” Her good news - that Jesus told her everything she had ever done - hints at there being more to the conversation than what John conveys, but are you at all perplexed by her enthusiasm? By Jesus’ knowledge of her leaving her with unquenchable joy, when her neighbors knowing her had left her going to the well for water, alone?

Lent 3 Yr A
March 15, 2020

Richard Lischer, a Lutheran pastor and professor, calls this episode with Jesus and the Samaritan woman, a love story: “. . . for only one who loves you knows you as you are and not as you pretend to be. Only one who loves you knows your deepest desires. Only one who loves you can look at your past without blinking. . . .” He continues: “We Christians know a lot about real love . . . but only because ‘he told me everything I ever did.’”¹

Jesus gave the woman the living water of love, love that fully knew her *and* fully accepted her. Love that looked at her and saw her beyond the labels, freeing her to see beyond them too. This love is ours because we share one label, *everyone* shares one label - child of God, made in God’s image, made to be loved and to love. When we can look at ourselves and one another and see that truth, that one label we all share, we can feel the Samaritan woman’s joy at being fully known.

What would a world with only one label - child of God, made in God’s image, made to be loved and to love - what would that world look like? What would it be like to live free of the labels that bring us pain or shame, that send us to the well alone? What would it be like, when encountering someone, to *first* see a beloved child of God, before our heart or head tried to tell us anything else? When the Samaritan woman tastes the freedom of being truly seen, and loved, in the face of all she had done, she left the one who gave her that freedom, so she could share it. “Come and see,” she invited the neighbors who had shunned her. And they listened, and they went, and they saw the Savior of the world. That’s what being seen by love does - it sets us free to share it; it quenches our thirst forever.

There’s a certain irony in talking about how God’s love can free us, in the midst of a global pandemic. As uncertainty ripples throughout the world and anxiety abounds, we’re being told to keep our hands to ourselves and to keep our distance. It can be hard to feel seen, at a distance, to remember that your label is “child of God, made in God’s image, made to be loved and to love,” when you’re home alone, reading headlines about newly confirmed cases of people who are ill, stock market volatility, empty store shelves, and a zillion closures and cancellations. As we do our best to protect ourselves and those we love from getting sick, we need to remember that humanity, *all* of us, are in this *together*, and remember to reach out, without touching, so that, in their isolation, no one forgets what their true label is.

Amen.
Kelly⁺

¹ Richard Lischer, “Strangers in the Night,” in *The Christian Century*, Feb. 24, 1999: www.religion-online.org or www.textweek.com/mkjnacts/jn4.htm.