

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt
Third Sunday in Lent - Year A
St. Paul's Lutheran Church
Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-42
03/12/2023

Gospel

If the congregation would please be seated

As if this text wasn't long enough already, I've added back the first five verses.

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

1Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John" 2— although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized — 3he left Judea and started back to Galilee. 4But he had to go through Samaria. 5So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. 7A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 8(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 9The 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.) 10Jesus 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." 11The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is

deep. Where do you get that living water? 12Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" 13Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14but 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." 15The 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." 16Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." 17The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 18for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" 19The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 20Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." 21Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23But 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. 24God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." 25The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." 26Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." 27Just 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?" 28Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 29Come and see a man who told me

everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he? 30They left the city and were on their way to him. 31Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." 32But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." 33So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" 34Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. 35Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. 36The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. 37For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' 38I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." 39Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." 40So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. 41And many more believed because of his word. 42They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

The Woman... Pt 2.

Good morning! We don't have time for a funny story this morning, we need to jump right in! One of the best sermons I have ever heard was at a UMC church in Columbia, SC. I was amazed because the preacher there was

able to preach a compelling and interesting sermon for 30 minutes about ONE SINGLE VERSE. That means a similar sermon on this text would last 21 hours, if I did my math correctly, which to be honest, isn't a given. Anyways! We better get started! Bathroom breaks will be on the hour...

Any sermon on this assigned text is tough, as we discussed this previous Monday, we have SO MUCH to work with! But the bulk of my research for this week comes from my sermon 7 years ago and the wonderful book *Back to the Well: Women's encounters with Jesus in the Gospels* by Frances Taylor Gench.¹

If you have heard this text before, the many interpretations that have come from it are usually based on the woman's promiscuity and embarrassment. I ask you to put these interpretations aside as we look at another possibility. While I'm not ready to cast off this interpretation as impossible, I do think we need to take a different look at the text.

Gench makes a wonderful observation about the history of interpretation for this text, and it's there where I think we should start. A natural question we should ask ourselves is this: How has this text been interpreted historically? What has the tradition of the church said about this text? It seems that the older the interpretation, the more favorably we see the woman at the well. Ancient writers, including Augustine, saw her favorably, urging listeners to follow her example in witnessing to Christ.² Medieval theologians were rather indifferent, seeing her in a neutral sort of lens. But then we get to the times of the Protestant Reformation, and something goes horribly wrong. The reformers of the sixteenth century seem to demonize her, one writer saying:

¹ Gench, Frances Taylor. *Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels*. Louisville: WJK Westminster John Knox Press, 2004. pp. 109-135.

² *Ibid.* p. 121.

“The samaritans... ‘did not believe through the word of the apostles, who were chosen by Christ and sent to preach the Gospel, but through the words of a woman, a person of inferior sex, and a private citizen not called to the ministry of the word.’”³

John Calvin likewise is an idiot when he argues her job was solely to report to the townsfolk saying:

“If she had presumed to teach or preach, she would have acted recklessly, since she hardly knew anything about Christ or heavenly doctrine.”⁴

Even Martin Luther is guilty of missing the significance of the text. In the 530 pages he devotes to the first four chapters of the Gospel of John he only gives the 42 verses of our story a mere 15 pages of attention. How in the world did they end up there? So quick to slander or dismiss such a profound story in the Gospel of John? A Gospel, I will remind you, that is usually the favorite of most theologians, including most of the Reformers, Martin Luther too.

One of the points that is usually made is that the woman at the well has had five husbands and is currently living with a sixth man, not her husband. BUT, as some scholars have pointed out, marital imagery isn't anything new for Jewish literature. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures we see Israel taking on the role of the bride and God the faithful bridegroom. What is interesting is that the original listeners would have been expecting a completely different outcome. Gench calls our attention to the expected “boy meets girl at well” story. The listeners would have been familiar with similar stories from the Hebrew Scriptures. Isaac met Rebecca, Jacob met

³ Ibid. p. 122.

⁴ Ibid.

Rachel, and Moses met Zipporah. It was a common biblical pattern, and the writer of John is setting us up expecting one thing and delivering something much different.

There is some sense that the woman at the well could be seen as allegorical, in 2 Kings 17-24 the Assyrians conquer the region of Samaria and bring in colonists from 5 other nations to intermix with the Samaritans, it's why the Jews saw them as unclean. We never get the woman's name, and so it is possible to look at the text from this perspective. The sixth man she is living with could be a reference to Rome, a "man" that even Israel was living with.

The Greek used here also supports looking at the text in this light. The woman speaks for all of Samaria, in the same way that Nicodemus spoke for Israel last week. Both this week and last week's stories use second person plurals throughout the text. They speak for their entire community, not just themselves. In English we translate the second person plural as you, but in seminary we were taught to adopt the common southern "y'all" so that it was clear we meant the plural form of the word. Verses 21-22 follow this pattern. Even if this woman is living with a sixth man, it's not as if women of the first century had many rights, divorce was easy for men, and women could be dismissed for any number of trivial reasons.

We're still in the beginning of the Gospel of John, and so it is important to compare the texts from last week and this week together. The Nicodemus story Vicar Lucas preached about last week starts a trend that we will see throughout the entire Gospel EXCEPT for today's story. For most of the Gospel the people that Jesus encounters speak only a few brief words that only serve to introduce Jesus' lengthy discourses. As Gench jokingly points out, "Wordy is our Lamb." Contrast these brief encounters

with the words of today's text and we see that this is the LONGEST recorded conversation that ANYONE has with Jesus in all of the Gospels... not just the Gospel of John. We cannot dismiss this as a fluke, nowhere else, especially in John, does anyone hold their own in an argument with Jesus. Where Nicodemus gets hung up on one interpretation of the words that Jesus uses, our woman at the well is astute enough to form a theological argument against Jesus that moves past basic understanding.

All Jews traveling from north to south would avoid Samaria altogether. Traveling through the region was simply an impossibility that wasn't even factored into one's plans, even when rushed for speed. Jesus likewise was in no real rush. When we read that "it was necessary" for Jesus to travel through Samaria we must take into account the cosmic scale of the Gospel. Just a few verses before, we hear that the Son of God has come so that ALL might be saved through him, including Gentiles and Samaritans. *"The narrator speaks not of geographical necessity, but of theological necessity — the divine imperative of Jesus' presence among the Samaritan People."*

I know, I haven't discussed why she was at the well so late in the day. Was she avoiding the community by coming at the brightest time of day? Possibly, but let's not forget how important light and darkness are for our Gospel writer. Last week in Nicodemus' story he visits in the middle of the night, the darkest time, afraid to show his faith in Jesus and unable to grasp the meaning of the words Jesus speaks. Maybe the woman arrives at the well in the middle of the day because it's at high-noon, the time where the most light is visible. She gets it, she sees the reality of the words that Jesus speaks in direct contrast to what Nicodemus misses last week.

Another component is the inability for the “right” people to get Jesus. Nicodemus is a leader in the Jewish faith, and the Apostles who come back to Jesus after his encounter with the woman also miss the larger point that Jesus is trying to make. Instead of the “good, faithful church-going” people getting what he says, it’s the least likely of all groups who accept Jesus’ message!

So what do we make of this story? One thing that is abundantly clear is that things are far more complex than we first thought. It’s also a reminder that our presuppositions, just like the patriarchal attitudes of many men today, including myself, can make us blind to truths behind the text. Regardless of how we look at the text one thing is clear: the woman serves as a wonderful example of faith.

So often we assume that we need to have everything together to bear witness to Jesus Christ, but the woman at the well shows us just how wrong we are. “Come see the man who knew everything about me! He can’t be the Messiah! Can he?!” she testifies. Doubt is a normal part of our faith, it shows us that we’re at least wrestling with what we believe.

Ultimately the identity of the woman fades to the background, she could be any one of us, we could all be in her shoes. The focus of the story, and why we are in this very room, is Jesus Christ and him crucified. This story shows us that we have a God who will stop at NOTHING to bring us all back into God’s flock. Our God comes offering living water, a water that was given to us in the very Sacrament of Baptism. In those waters we are washed clean, nourished and supported in our new life, a life yoked to a loving and magnificent God. Amen.