

John 4: 5-42

Third Sunday in Lent

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There's a fairly common way of reading this story in which the Samaritan woman is assumed to be a woman of ill-repute - she of five husbands and a questionable current housing arrangement. And not only is that a common way of seeing her, it's a common practice regarding many of the women, named and unnamed, whom we meet in the Bible. Patterns of seeing women as either virgins or prostitutes, as temptresses who must be fought off or frail creatures who must be defended. And not a lot of space to exist between. But let me join a minority strand of readers and suggest that her story is just more complicated and likely much more tragic. If she's been married five times, it's not because she chose to bed husband after husband. A woman in that time would have had zero to say about her own marital status; so, either she was abandoned again and again, or she suffered successive losses and then found herself like that hypothetical bride in another story, marrying brother after brother because the law required it. But actually, we don't even have to know anything about female agency or ancient marriage rituals to see her in another light. If we can see her as Jesus does. Jesus never comments on a purported sinful status; he merely describes the situation accurately. And then he doesn't offer her forgiveness, because maybe she doesn't need it - at least not for this. We can also see that other light shining on her when we see her as her own town sees her. She hightails it into town to preach the good news to her village, and they listen to her and follow her not the response you'd expect to the town harlot. So maybe there's more to her story. Spoiler: of course, there's more to her story.

But we don't learn it. And fascinating and frustrating as I (and maybe you?) find all of this gendered commentary, today on the International Day of the Woman, there's another reason to consider the complexities of her life. Because it is what Jesus does in this, the longest encounter in John's whole gospel. Perhaps you noticed while Wesley was reading the story that it does go on a bit? Maybe, even though she never even gets a name, we're still supposed to see this story as significant: devoting more time and noticing more details. Maybe we're supposed to stay with her at the well, talking with Jesus for a while. Afterall, you do have to stay awhile with someone to see more than the thumbnail bio: "water-fetcher," "multiple marriages."

We have to stay a while, and both Jesus and the woman do stay a while. They settle in for a genuine encounter. Even with all the reasons not to: a Samaritan, which means a heretic at best and often an enemy, and worse than that, a woman (horrors!), still Jesus strikes up a conversation, seemingly not worried about the perceived impropriety. It's as if he knows, because of course he knows, that she is a real person, that her story is true, and complex, and that it will be worth his while to ask her for some water and see what happens next. And what happens next is that instead of being a cardboard cut-out, she emerges as a human who starts out like everyone Jesus meets -

flummoxed by his talk and initially concerned only about the pragmatics of buckets. But because Jesus lingers, and she lingers, and thus we linger, she becomes a whole person who is forthright about her circumstances, whether they are scandalous or sorrowful. And then becomes a person who's got some deep theological and thorny questions, who sees an opportunity in this waterside discussion to solve a worshipping conundrum. And then further, she becomes the very first person to preach about Jesus, "Come and see!" Did you notice in John's gospel, the first preacher is a foreigner, a heretic, a woman? And I'd venture to guess that she starts preaching because she was seen beyond all these labels. As Eugene Peterson's translation offers, she calls out, "Come see a man ... who knows me inside and out. Do you think this could be the Messiah?" It's as if the Messiah's very identity is revealed by revealing ours, by seeing us deeply and intimately

You can hear her still wondering, even as she announces she asks this question, "Do you think this could be the Messiah?" She is still trying to figure out what just happened, who she just met. Because not only is the encounter socially complicated, everything she learned is complicated. She made the leap from the small, daily concerns of wells and water-buckets, the sorts of things that occupy most of our daily conversations, to a worldly but still technical question about worship and interpretation: mountains or temples? And then all the way to a transformational grasp of what matters most: fullness of life, gushing up; the unbounded presence of God: it won't matter where we worship because the Spirit of God is everywhere. That's quite a journey. That's probably why the story is so long - shortcuts wouldn't work in their exchange, so shortcuts won't work for us as we listen in. Small talk by the well becomes a life-changing experience because the woman and Jesus stay present long enough for some kind of magic to unfold. Because he really sees her for who she is, she comes to see him for who he just might be.

Friends, all this digging around in the layers of a moment isn't just an exercise in Biblical literacy. It's a reminder to dig around in the layers of our own moments. I can glide along the surface with chatter about small things, and I can try to slip out of or avoid altogether conversations with people who, at a glance, seem too different or too messy. We can run our errands to the grocery store or the well and fill the moments we stand in line with a screen, instead of acknowledging that we are surrounded by humans with beautiful and tragic and complex stories. We can do this, live this way, and then we'll be just as thirsty as the woman who needed water in the middle of the day. We'll be just as thirsty as Jesus is for a real encounter, for conversations about the things that matter most. We'll be thirsty for meaning, for connection. We'll be starving to be seen and known.

Naomi Shihab Nye describes strangers we're predisposed to disdain and dismiss in a poem in which she says, "They are the bravest people on earth right now, / don't dare look down on them. Each mind a universe / swirling [with] as many details as yours, [with] as much love ..." A few weeks ago, we talked about the power of a generous imagination to change us and our world over against the inferior imagination of those who are only self-interested. Can we imagine for a moment that the person in front of us is a universe waiting to be explored, with loves as strong as our own? Can we imagine that it will be worth our time to stay a while and find out?

We're dying of thirst out here, desperate to understand and to be understood. And still we take the easy road of "she's probably not worth talking to and certainly not worth being seen talking

to.” And then so often, even when we do begin to talk, it’s merely logistics of schedules or an exchange of supplies: who’s got a bucket? Maybe you’ve heard people say of someone, they’re so heavenly-minded that they’re no earthly good? Well, we can also be so earthly-minded that we miss the heavenly moments of transformation. Preoccupied by only the material and the pragmatic, remember Nicodemus trying to figure out how a grown-up could get back inside a womb? When we don’t get curious, when a simple metaphor baffles us, we miss the chance to expand our spirits, to grow our hearts. When we don’t imagine generously, when a woman at the well turns into a flat projection, we miss seeing and being seen. When we don’t stay long enough, we don’t see the Messiah. It’s true that this takes practice and it takes time: time, which we think is so scarce, but it’s actually gushing up. And anyway, what else are we here for than to spend the time with each other, than to spend the time talking about real things, than to spend the time encountering Christ?