

Encounters with Jesus: Waiting By the Well
John 4: 5-42, Exodus 17:1-17

When people encountered Jesus, the meeting almost always changed them. This story is a wonderful example of that fact. And what a story it is! What a surprising encounter! Perhaps we've become too familiar with it to be moved by how startling it was, or to be fully aware of what it reveals about Jesus.

The first surprise is Jesus' speaking to this woman. Jesus isn't supposed to talk to her. John writes "the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans." But this is understatement. The Jews despised the Samaritans, and the feeling was mutual. It was the hatred born of family members who felt betrayed. Five hundred years before, the Jews living in Israel (north of Judea) had intermarried with their neighbors. Their progeny were the Samaritans. Not only had these people broken the sacred laws of purity, they also rejected the holy temple in Jerusalem, choosing instead to worship in their own temple. A hundred years before Jesus' time, the Jews destroyed the Samaritan's temple. The differences present day liberal and fundamental Christians have are nothing compared to the split between Samaritans and Jews. Their enmity comes closer to that experienced by Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, or between Palestinians and Israelis. And yet Jesus speaks to her.

And she is a woman. Jewish men did not speak to women in public, especially not to women they didn't know. A rabbi was careful not even to let a woman's shadow touch his body. And yet Jesus speaks to her.

She is a bad woman, and Jesus knows it. He probably also knows that her way of life has made her an outcast in her community. The other women of the village come to the well in the early morning or in the cool of the evening. Why would anyone come in the heat of the day, unless it is to avoid the stares and slights of others? We can imagine this one sitting in the shadows by her window, watching the others as they laugh and talk on their way to the well, wishing she could join them, longing for the acceptance she has lost. And Jesus speaks to her.

Jesus not only speaks. What he says is as amazing as the fact that he speaks at all: "Give me a drink." He asks for a favor. He opens the conversation by treating her as an equal, as more than an equal--as someone who can help him. When Jesus asks for a favor, he asks for something the woman can give him.

But there's more to it than that. To eat or drink with someone in that culture is to establish a relationship, and he is asking to drink from her water jug. When I was growing up in the South, I am embarrassed to say, every department store, and every public building, had two water fountains--one for whites and one for colored people. Whites just didn't drink from the same fountain as colored people did. It just wasn't done. Jews would have felt the same way about

drinking with Samaritans. And yet this is what Jesus proposes. No wonder the woman is surprised.

Finally, in the ensuing conversation, Jesus reveals to her who he is. The fact that she is a woman, a Samaritan, a sinner, isn't important. To him she is a person to whom he can speak about spiritual matters. "I can give you living water." When the woman mentions the Messiah, he responds, "I am he." The woman's wonder and joy are too great to be contained. She rushes to the very people who have rejected her with the news.

This story comes right after Jesus talk with Nicodemus. What contrasts! Nicodemus, the righteous learned Rabbi, comes at night. Jesus encounters the sinful Samaritan woman in the bright sun of midday. Nicodemus starts out confidently, "We know." Jesus initiates the conversation with the Samaritan woman by asking for something. Jesus talks to them both about matters of the spirit. Both Nicodemus and the woman begin by taking him literally, ("How can you climb into your mother's womb again?" "Give me this water so I won't have to come to the well".) We have no indication whether Nicodemus ever really understood what Jesus was talking about. The woman on the other hand, gradually catches on. We can see by her responses that she gradually understands. Nicodemus disappears into the night. The woman, on the other hand, becomes the second person (after John the Baptist) to tell people about Jesus.

Jesus talks to both of them about deeper matters--about their spiritual lives, about the possibility of a new, eternal life in him. Jesus says he can give living water--water that will become in people a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. I've been told that living water is flowing water, water that springs forth and splashes and sparkles. It's difficult for us, living here in Southern California, as it may have been difficult for the woman of Samaria, to remember that there are springs and creeks and rivers that never run dry. God's healing and restoring and nourishing love for us in Jesus is like that-- like an ever-flowing stream. And Jesus says it brings eternal life. Yes, without at doubt eternal life means life after death, but Let me remind you that this life begins now, this eternal life is our new life in Christ--it's our new life of the spirit. It's our transformed life to live; our spirits need the living water Christ provides. And, as he told the woman, all we have to do is ask for it.

All of this may sound pretty mystical and strange, but it has absolutely practical results in our lives here and now. The living water, the eternal life, means a different quality of life for us--it means we are changed, we are different, our wounds can be healed our relationships can be healed, and, wonder of wonders the living water not only washes over us, but can spill over to refresh and bless others. Look at the woman of Samaria again. She must have been living in guilt and shame. Because of this her relationship with the other villagers was probably broken. She probably came to the well in the heat of the day to

avoid being stared at and shunned. But after meeting Jesus she leaves her water jar. She leaves her water jar. John loves symbols--what a fitting symbol this is. The water jar is a symbol of her physical thirst. She's no longer concerned with her physical thirst, she has something deeper and more precious, she has living water. .

. Jesus and the Samaritan woman have much to teach us. First they remind us that we are accepted. We may not be as sinful as the Samaritan woman, but we, too, have experienced the guilt of sin, haven't we? And we may not have been ostracized as she probably was, but we all know what it's like to be an outsider, don't we? Perhaps we grew up in the community where we were labeled because of our cultural heritage. Or perhaps we moved to a new place and were outsiders because no one knew us or cared to know us. Perhaps there was a club or a school or a group that excluded us. We all know what being an outsider feels like. And Jesus reaches out to us.

Secondly, they can teach us to accept others. This world is full of so much brokenness and hatred. A month or so ago we experienced two murders that were probably hate crimes. Can we, like Jesus, reach out to build bridges in our community. Can we include the outsiders? Can we, like the Samaritan woman, run with good news to those who have rejected us?

Third we learn Jesus' way of evangelism? Rather than imparting our goods or our wisdom, we can invite someone to share what they have. A pastor (I'll call him John Milligan recounts that when he was young he was a terror. Unlike his older brothers, he was disruptive in Sunday school and in worship. He became known, not by his name, but by the phrase "that other Milligan kid." Then a new pastor came. One day as he was walking down the hall, the pastor came up, threw his arm around him and said, "John," (he used his name) John I want you to help me with something. This one act made all the difference in John's life. It turned him around and set his life on a new course.

I wish we knew the Samaritan woman's name. Like so many in the Bible she's not considered important enough to have her name recorded. I'm tempted to call her "Samantha" or "Sam."

Yesterday some of us heard Dr. Appleton give an amazing talk about Leadership. One of the things he said was, "A good leader works toward helping everyone in the group become a success." That's what Jesus does for the Samaritan women. He begins by asking for water, and before he is done, she became a witness to the living water. Can we learn that?

Finally, the Samaritan woman herself teaches us about evangelism. She doesn't go back to the village announcing, "I have found the Christ." She doesn't with long arguments, or even with bold assertions about Jesus. She invites them to come meet Jesus, and she shares her own experience. "He told

me all I ever did.” In other words, he knew all about me. And she let them make up their own minds “Could this be the Messiah?” . We can do that!

Let us pray. Yes, Lord, we’re asking. We want the living water to well up inside of us. We want to be changed people, and we want to share this living water with others. Fill, us, change us, and let us overflow with love. Amen