

They couldn't be more different. Nicodemus began our scripture last week by seeking a conversation with Jesus. He is an educated man, a Jewish leader. He seeks out Jesus under the cover of darkness, and after a theological conversation in which Nicodemus speaks twice in the entire 17 verses, the story ends, with no explanation of what Nicodemus did next. This week, our text focuses on a woman who is by all definitions an outsider – she is a woman, she is a Samaritan, she is alone at the well at mid-day. The biblical text does not even see fit to give her name. Her story begins when she encounters Jesus under the noon day sun, and he begins the conversation by asking her for something. Their conversation lasts for 27 verses in which the woman speaks six times. And at the end of the exchange, she doesn't fade into the background, but instead runs back to her town to tell everyone what she has experienced and her testimony results in many Samaritans believing in Jesus as the Messiah. This last difference, that the woman so transformed by her exchange with Jesus that she shares the story with everyone in Sychar, strikes me the most given because she is the ultimate outsider. Nicodemus had power and education and at least a name worth mentioning – he was a somebody. This unnamed woman was a nobody.

The woman in this story is not like other Samaritan women. The daily task of fetching water in ancient times was usually a communal one. Women would travel to the well in groups and this was typically done in the evening when the temperatures were cooler but before the sun had set. But she has arrived at the well alone, in the middle of the day. The text doesn't tell us why this is but many wonder if her solitary status and unusual timing are an effort by the woman to avoid the other women of Sychar. It is reasonable to assume that for some reason, this woman is an outcast.

To fully appreciate this text, we must understand the context of Jewish-Samaritan relations in first century Palestine. This information may be old news to some of you, but I think it's important that we all be on the same page. The tension between Jews and Samaritans begins in the 8th century BCE. Assyria had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and many of the Israelites were sent into exile. The King of Assyria repopulated the area of Samaria with people from five tribes in the Assyrian Empire. At

that time, it was the belief that each geographic area had its own god and it was customary to worship the god of the land in which you lived. But the new immigrants were continuing to worship the gods of their homelands. The Assyrian King brought an Israelite priest out of exile in order to teach these new Samaritans how to worship the god of Israel. The result was a merging of their former customs with Israelite worship. But this was just the beginning. The most intense rivalry began about 400 years later in the 4th century BCE when the Samaritans built a shrine for worship on Mount Gerizim. The Jewish people had for centuries held the belief that the central location for worship was the Temple in Jerusalem and this new shrine was a blatant challenge to this tradition. In 128 BCE, Jewish troops destroyed the shrine and relations between the Samaritans and the Jews had never recovered.

So, the conversation between Jesus and the unnamed Samaritan woman is scandalous in almost every way imaginable. Not only is Jesus, a Jew, talking to a Samaritan, as a rabbi, it was unheard of for him to speak to a woman in public, and not just any woman - a Samaritan woman who for some reason is on the margins even in her own community. The woman fully appreciates the situation. We can hear the shock in her voice possibly coupled with disgust, or maybe just simple curiosity when she responds to Jesus' request for a drink. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" And this is what I love about Jesus. Jesus breaks down all the walls - the walls that for centuries had separated the Jews and the Samaritans, the walls that kept women in their place and men at the center of power and influence, the walls that separated the outcasts from the rest of the community. These walls of separation have no place in the kin-dom of God.

As the discussion about water unfolds, it appears that the woman thinks Jesus is speaking literally when he is actually using water as a metaphor. She practically mocks Jesus for his offer by pointing out that he has no bucket and the well is deep. But it is possible, and I think much more interesting if we read her responses as also metaphorical. Biblical scholar Sister Teresa Okure puts it this way and I quote "For the woman, the well is a living testimony to her people's descent from Jacob...She

compares Jesus to Jacob, the giver of the well who water, in her view, Jesus seems to slight. Her reply is in effect, a defense of ancestral water... This is not just any well, but one that is renowned for its antiquity and whose usage goes back to the founding father himself. Yet despite the centuries of use, the well has neither dried up nor become exhausted. So, in addition to its revered ancestry, the well has a character which is almost eternal. Can Jesus, then, possibly produce anything better?"¹ The use of water and thirst as a metaphor for relationship to the divine was a familiar one in the Jewish faith. They often spoke of the thirst of the soul for God and of quenching that thirst with living water. Jesus was not using terms that were bound to be misunderstood. Knowing this, when the woman says to Jesus "give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty" I kind of think she is calling his bluff. You have access to this living water? Prove it!

What Jesus does next is extraordinary. He does not perform some fantastic miracle so that the woman might believe in him. Instead, they have a conversation. Jesus indicates that he knows she has had five husbands and that the one she has now is not her husband. Many scholars argue that this piece of dialogue proves that the woman was of poor moral character which explains why she would be at the well at noon by herself. But there is no judgment coming from Jesus. He does not ask for her repentance or tell her to sin no more. He simply acknowledges her status as a fact of her life. It is quite possible that the woman's status is a result of the custom of levirate marriage. A custom in which the brother of a deceased man is obligated to marry his brother's widow. Perhaps after marrying and widowing five brothers, the last male in the family line has refused to marry her. The marriages can also be read metaphorically. The Samaritans have worshipped the gods of the five foreign tribes who populated Samaria at the hand of the Assyrian king and the version of the Jewish faith they were practicing was viewed by the Israelites as contaminated. However we decide to interpret the conversation about her husbands, the result is the same - Jesus demonstrates that he knows her. He knows that the culture expects him to treat her as an outsider, as

¹ Teresa Okure, *Johannine Approach to Mission: Contextual Study of John 4: 1-42* (Coronet Books Inc., 1987), 89, 99, 100.

inferior, even as an enemy. But instead, Jesus offers an ever-flowing, thirst-quenching relationship with the divine.

The woman is still skeptical. She is willing to admit that Jesus must be a prophet, but she challenges him about the proper place of worship. Jesus yet again responds in a way that builds relationship. His answer is shocking and convincing. Jesus does not debate her, instead he proclaims that true worship of God is not defined by a location, but is defined by God's own nature, which is spirit and truth. God transcends gender, race, tradition, economic class, even location. We can almost see the wheels turning in her head as she processes the answer provided by Jesus. She seems to be searching for an explanation or maybe a confirmation of a hunch she has about Jesus by saying "I know the Messiah is coming...and when he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus confirms her suspicions or at the very least eases her skepticism when he replies that he is indeed the Messiah.

Their conversation is cut short by the return of the disciples. Sensing their unspoken objections to her presence, she returns to the city. That could have been the end of the story. She could have returned home and not said a word to anyone about what happened at the well. Jesus didn't ask her to say anything to anyone or even to change anything about herself. She leaves the conversation still wondering who exactly the man at the well really is. But something about her experience with Jesus compelled her to speak up. This woman was given the living water of which Jesus spoke and it had created a wellspring in her soul. How could she not share it? As Fred Craddock writes, "She is a witness, but not a likely witness and not even a thorough witness: "A man who told me all that I ever did" is not exactly a recitation of the Apostles Creed. She is not even a convinced witness: "Can this be the Christ?" is literally "This cannot be the Christ, can it?" Even so, her witness is enough: it is invitational (come and see), not judgmental; it is within the range permitted by her experience; it is honest with its own uncertainty; it is for everyone who will hear."²

² Fred Craddock, "The Witness at the Well (Jn. 4:5-42.)," *Christian Century*, March 7, 1990, 243.

For the people of Sychar, Christ is revealed to them through someone they considered a nobody. This woman without a name, alone at the well, becomes the first apostle – the first person in John’s gospel to be sent forth to proclaim the Good News to others. This outcast, transformed by her encounter with Love incarnate, takes that encounter and reveals the nature of God to others. I have said before that each scripture text can speak many truths for us. This morning, this is the truth for me – that Christ is revealed to us in the face of outsiders. The outcasts, the nobodies.

I recently saw a short video that seems to have been inspired by a story called Lunch with God. A little boy, maybe 7 or 8 years old, is shown packing his backpack with a few Twinkies and a few bottles of juice. As he heads out the door his mom asks him where he’s going. He replies “I’m going to find God.” She chuckles and tells him to be back for dinner.

After a subway ride and a long walk he enters a park and sits on a bench. A few feet away is an older woman who appears to be homeless. The boy opens his backpack and takes out two Twinkies and offers one to the woman. She smiles and they eat together. Then he takes out a juice and just as he is about to drink it he notices she looks thirsty. He gives her the juice and pulls out another for himself. They drink together and laugh together but never exchange a word. After a while the boy looks at his watch and says “Gotta go” but doesn’t leave before giving the woman a big hug. When he gets home, his mom asks “Did you find him?” The boy replies “God is a woman mom, and she has the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen.”

Then the woman is shown walking up to and sitting next to a friend who is holding a sign that reads “Need money for food”. As she sits down, she is grinning from ear to ear. Her friend asks why she’s in such a good mood. She replies "I ate Twinkies in the park with God." And, before the friend can respond she adds, "You know, he's much younger than I expected."³

³ <https://www.facebook.com/MeirKay/videos/821002948038342/>

The presence of Christ is revealed to us in the outsider, the outcast, the people whom society, or at least parts of society, considers nobodies. How do we know who society considers a nobody? One way is to look at where we put our money. Do we value senior citizens who need a few hot meals delivered their homes? Do we value artists and creative people? Do we value children who would go hungry without free and reduced school lunches? Do we value people who come to this country to escape war, poverty, and persecution? Do we value the person with a preexisting condition seeking affordable medical care? Do we value the person sleeping on the street because the funding for affordable housing is not deemed as important as spending more on our military defense than the next seven countries combined?⁴ Many in our society have deemed these people as nobodies. In some of these cases, WE ARE these people.

Our text this morning tells a different story. It tells a story of a transformation that begins with a human need – the need for water. Jesus is thirsty. The woman is also thirsty but for a living water that would quench the thirst in her soul. This thirst-quenching is so transformational that the incarnate love of God overflows and this woman, this outsider, this nobody, reveals Christ to everyone she meets. May we recognize Christ in this woman when we see her for ourselves. May we be this woman when we are tempted to believe the lie that we too are nobody.

⁴ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-budget-idUSKBN1661R2>, Accessed March 19, 2017.