

Called to Evangelize

February 7, 2021

John 4: 25-42

“The woman at the well” is one of the most interesting stories in the *Bible*. As the lesson-writer mentions, it is the longest conversation recorded for Jesus – 20 verses. The full story runs from verse 4:1 to 42. This is a remarkable commitment of resources for that time in antiquity – the effort and expenses of writing, copying, and transmitting this as part of the *Gospel of John*. John, writing the last of the gospels, had the luxury of time to focus his efforts on things that were passed by in the other gospels. *Mark*, *Matthew* and *Luke* were already in circulation by that time. John’s testimony to us does not depend on those other sources, as Matthew and Luke do on *Mark* and on some other material common to both *Matthew* and *Luke*. Consider the differences up to this point in John:

Mark omits infancy narratives in his haste to give his readers the essentials of the Good News. Matthew and Luke give us different information about Jesus’s birth. John instead backs off to give us a “big picture” view of what Jesus coming into the world meant in Chapter 1. Then Jesus is baptized by John and calls the first of his disciples (Peter, Andrew, Philip, Nathaniel and one unnamed – John?) while still there in John’s camp in Judea. Chapter 2 gives us the Wedding at Cana, absent in the other gospels. Jesus returns to Jerusalem for Passover, where he “cleanses” the Temple. Nicodemus then comes and talks to Jesus by night in Chapter 3. Also, Jesus’s teaching is witnessed by some of John the Baptist’s followers. Jesus and his disciples then start back to Galilee. It is on that return trip that Jesus encounters the woman at the well. In contrast, the other gospels report only one trip from Galilee to Jerusalem during Jesus’s ministry, when he was to die. Much of what John reports later takes place in or near Jerusalem; there is less about Jesus’s ministry in Galilee (primarily chapters 5-6). We don’t have the extended teachings in John like the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain of Matthew and Luke. There are but few parables.

What we do have in John, though, are these several stories that illustrates truths about Jesus that John thinks are important. Many of these, such as the interview with Nicodemus and the conversation at the woman at the well, are small, individual encounters. Where in other gospels we hear what Jesus says in public, in John we hear Jesus in numerous one on one encounters, or words said privately to his disciples. In John, these small encounters present a different pattern of learning.

Consider Jesus's meeting with Nicodemus shortly before today's story. Nicodemus comes by night and tells Jesus that he recognizes that Jesus has come from God. Jesus utters a mysterious saying, "You must be born again (or from above)". Nicodemus misunderstands, and takes the comment literally. Jesus remarks on his lack of understanding. Jesus explains. Then (in verses 16-21) he extends the explanation to be comprehensive of his mission. We don't hear anything more of Nicodemus until he shows his faith in helping bury Jesus (John 19:39). This same kind of back and forth occurs in numerous places in *John*.

We see a similar pattern with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus asks for a drink of water, an unusual and surprising opening. The woman explains that she is surprised, and why. Jesus then tells her about "living water." She takes him literally and asks for some. Jesus then takes the conversation in a new direction appropriate to his message and teaching. We didn't get the follow-up to Nicodemus's visit in Chapter 3, but for this unnamed but important woman, we see how she not only believes, but spreads the gospel message to those of her city. This is where today's Bible study scripture reading begins.

Before we get to that, though, I'd like to present a bit more about who the Samaritans were. The Northern Kingdom of Israel, with its capitol of Samaria, was conquered by the Assyrians in 723 B.C. To disrupt subjugated nations, the Assyrians removed most of the Israelites from their home territory in Palestine, and took them off to places in Assyria and Medea. They became known as the "Ten Lost Tribes." The Assyrians then took other conquered subjects from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hatham, and Sepharvaim, and settled them in the lands just cleansed of Israelites. Because these people didn't know how to properly worship the local God of the land, some priests were sent back from the captured Israelites to educate them. (See II Kings 17 for the full story.)

These people in northern Palestine eventually came to be known as Samaritans, after the Israelite capital Samaria, and the region of Israel that had been the Northern Kingdom became known as Samaria. When the Jews returned from their own exile to Babylon, they clashed with these Samaritans. The Samaritans offered to help rebuild the temple. But they were seen as semi-heathen by the Jews, since they practiced the Israelite religion differently, along with their own heathen religions, as had Israelites earlier. Ezra and Nehemiah ruled that the returned Jews would have no part with the Samaritans in their worship or community. Anyone who had married a Samaritan was required to obtain a divorce.

So, feelings between Jews and Samaritans were far from neighborly. During the Persian period, each sent letters and emissaries to Persia to appeal their case against the other. When the Jews obtained national liberation during the Maccabee period, one of the things they did was to destroy the Samaritans' main temple on Mount Gerizim. By the time of Jesus, the area of Samaria was greatly reduced by various encroachments, including Jews and Greeks who had settled in Galilee, the Decapolis, and other nearby areas. The Samaritans were understandably rather bitter about the way they had been treated and disrespected by the Jews.

There were some important differences between the Samaritan and Jewish religions. Both held the "Books of Moses" (the Torah) to be sacred. But, each had their own version of those books. So, both the Samaritans and Jews looked back to pretty nearly the same story of the Creation, the Patriarchs, Exodus from Egypt, and the conquest of the Promised Land. The Jews held "The Prophets" to be sacred writings; the Samaritans didn't. That was especially important, because many of those prophetic writings were from the days when the Samaritans and Jews were opponents. A point especially important to today's scripture is that the Samaritans held that God was to be worshiped on Mount Gerizim. The Jews instead held that the one place to properly worship God (and to build a temple) was Mount Zion, that is, in Jerusalem. Was either religion better than the other? With the benefit of hindsight, we can say "yes." The Prophets make a huge difference. Consider how much poorer spiritually we would be without the words of Elijah, Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Jesus himself recognized this, when he told the woman, "... for salvation is from the Jews." (John 4:22b)

The importance of Jerusalem was relatively late in Israelite history. That city remained a heathen outpost within Canaan until the time of David, about 1000 B.C. David conquered Jerusalem just before the Kingdom of Israel reunited under David. Israel split again, permanently, after Solomon. So a united Israel only existed briefly after Joshua and the conquest of the land. After Solomon, the Israelites worshiped at Dan and Bethel (near Mount Gerizim) where Jeroboam had golden calves set up to represent God. The Southern Kingdom of Judah continued to worship God at Jerusalem. So, the Samaritan – Jewish split really goes back even further than the Assyrian conquest. It was a bitter North against South kind of relationship, reinforced by acts of spite and distrust and vengeance. Is it any wonder that the woman was surprised that Jesus spoke to her? She was a Samaritan. Beyond that, a woman as well, and not a very reputable woman at that.

When I read Jesus's conversation with the woman in John 4:7-26, I am newly amazed at how Jesus manages to get past all of the barriers that should normally prevent any depth of discourse, or for that matter any words at all, between Jesus and the woman. Jesus uses his willingness to break convention even to speak to her. He does so by appealing to human need – he is thirsty. He answers her skepticism and raising of the Jewish – Samaritan issue by introducing the mysterious “living water.” This is slightly an insult on her well. Living water was understood to be running water, as opposed to rain or standing water. Jesus gives the term “living water” a wider meaning – water which will ultimately satisfy. She bites on this hook. Then the conversation could turn more personal. Jesus seemed to know a lot about her. The woman deflects that direction by changing the subject back to the Samaritan – Jewish differences. But Jesus had made his point, and addresses those differences by focusing on the future that will see true worship of God. Ultimately Jesus revealed himself as the Messiah, a topic that she had raised.

In our scripture reading from this point, we see something of a similar nature play out between Jesus and his disciples. They offer food, but Jesus says he has food that they don't know about. They take him literally. “Where did he get food?” Jesus explains, “My food is to do the work of him who sent me and to complete his work.” (John 4:34). Then Jesus expands his explanation.

Meanwhile the woman Jesus talked to has hurried to her town (leaving her water jar) and returned with those she had told in the city. When they come out and meet Jesus, they too are convinced. Jesus and his disciples stayed there two days, another unimaginable thing for a Jew to do in Samaria. Jesus was willing to set aside all of those issues which Jews had for centuries drawn on to maintain their separation from the Samaritans. God's message of salvation was bigger than just the Jewish nation. It was for Samaritans as well. The fact that they had been worshiping God on Mount Gerizim would no longer matter. The Messiah was present.

It is interesting that the reading ends with what could be considered an insult. The woman's neighbors in the city say to her, “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.” Even after bringing them such important news, she is not respected! This would not have been a surprise. Given that she has been married five times and was now living with someone not her husband, we can suppose that she was something of an outcast. Yet, even so, she had to share this good news!

In the presence of good news, should we not share it? But, suppose others don't respect us, or hold us in contempt? What then? This woman laid all of that aside. Yes, they didn't respect her. But, she had good news! The Messiah was here! She could not contain herself.

Look what she achieved! The Messiah himself stopped and spent two days with them. He would have taught and brought to that community a new way of seeing the world. It was a God-focused way of being that was able to set aside differences, just as Jesus had set aside the contempt that most Jews had for Samaritans. This was indeed "living water."

I see this story as telling us that we too should be prepared, and even look for, ways to set aside our differences from others, even others who hold us in contempt. We have been blessed, and we need to live that blessing so that others may see and hear. So what if someone deliberately tosses snow into your cleared driveway. What would Jesus do? Maybe he would help that neighbor finish his driveway. Suppose someone inflicts a clever insult. Well, maybe there's a way to twist or misunderstand the insult into a seeming compliment and say, "Thank you." Yes, the World sometimes hates people who are cheerful, who live above the pettiness and backstabbing and put-downs that are the mark of cleverness and standing in our society. But, there are those also who yearn for something better, for the Living Water that Christ offers. Let us strive, like this woman, who isn't even named, much less credited. It was she who brought the Good News to others, a good news that helped make God's Kingdom more complete. She blesses us with an example of Jesus's compassion and teaching, and her faithfulness and trust.

Prayer: Jesus, giver of living water, thank you for talking with a woman at a well. Thank you for understanding her and understanding us. Help us to love you so much that talking about your goodness flows into our conversations. Amen.