

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah
Pastor John Guthrie

“The Woman of Samaria”
Romans 5.1-11; John 4.5-30



Calvin and Susie have an enduring battle, primarily because Calvin has an innate aversion to girls. For a counter example, we have Jesus in his dealing today with this woman of Samaria. But first, recall his entirely different meeting with an entirely different person from the reading from John last Sunday.

You remember Nicodemus. He's the influential Jewish leader, a member of the high council of the Jews, who comes to see Jesus at night, loaded with questions. We took a close look at his story last week. Nicodemus comes to Jesus because he has seen or heard about certain signs or miracles that Jesus has performed. There is no doubt that Nicodemus is a very educated man: he had almost certainly studied the Jewish scriptures, and especially the Torah, from a very early age. It is even likely that his father before him was also a Pharisee. He is respected by his fellow Jews, one of the elite in society, probably wealthy and secure. He is also secure in his religion – he has no doubts that he worships the one true God, the God of his ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In the very next chapter of John's gospel we meet this particular Samaritan woman. What do we know about her? Well, first and second, she is a woman, and she is a Samaritan. As you are well aware, men and women did not mix easily in first century Jewish society. Normally it was forbidden for unaccompanied Jewish men to speak to unaccompanied women. Furthermore, as you are also aware, women typically inhabited a lower social status than men, and were generally expected to defer to their husbands in all things.

And then: she is a Samaritan. You have heard rehearsed many times before the hostility felt and expressed between Samaritans and Jews in the first century. To most Jews of that time, Samaritans are half-breeds, Jews who had long ago begun to intermarry with foreigners, in contradiction of the clear teaching of the Torah. They are thus unclean and despised by most good Jews.

As illustrated in this very passage, they insist that the proper place of worship is on Mt. Gerazim, in their homeland, and not on Mount Zion, on which Jerusalem is situated. The

Samaritans accept only the Torah, the first five books of our Bible, as authoritative scripture, and reject all of the other books of history, poetry, and prophecy that the Jews embrace as holy scripture.

In traveling from Galilee to Judea or back, Jews would typically cross over to the east side of the River Jordan so as to avoid passing through the land of Samaria in between. The detour would cost them days of travel, but they did it anyway. Better than passing through the accursed and unclean land of Samaria.

So this person who meets Jesus at the well is both a woman and a Samaritan. We also find, in the course of the conversation, that she has had five husbands and is now living with a man who is not her husband. The details are not clear, but it is likely that the woman has married five times and been divorced five times, so that now, jaded on the concept of marriage, she simply lives with a man. Thus, it is also likely that she is despised and loathed by both the men and especially the women in her village of Sychar. We are not told her name.

She probably had no education whatsoever. Note that she apparently knows nothing about Jesus, and Jesus speaks first to her, not the other way around.

John placed the stories of Nicodemus and the Samaritan women next to each other for important literary and theological reasons. Nicodemus, the respected, educated, wealthy, Jewish man who approaches Jesus by night and knows who he is. And this person with no name, reviled, uneducated, poor, Samaritan, and female, whom Jesus approaches at noontime and has no idea who he is.

Isn't it ironic that, at the end of their conversations, Nicodemus is still deeply confused, even though he has begun a journey that will totally change his life and his understanding of his faith. On the other hand, this Samaritan woman leaves and runs to the center of her village, in wonder and excitement, asking out loud, “Surely he can't be the Messiah. Can he?” Her journey of faith already seems well on its way.

She comes to the well at noon, and there is no one there but Jesus. Note that Jesus has chosen not to take the usual detour around Samaria, but is passing right through the despised region. The disciples have gone into town to buy something for them to eat. It is at least conceivable that this woman, considered sinful and unclean by the other women of Sychar, comes at noon because they come in the evening. She is able to avoid their sneers, disdain, and remarks simply by avoiding them. We wonder if she might be desperately lonely.

There, much to her surprise, is a man, and she must immediately recognize the social impropriety of the two of them together alone. But she must have water. To her utter astonishment, he asks her for a drink. She stammers out her response, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman and a Samaritan?”

Jesus responds with some strange words about how, if she knew the gift of God and who it is that is speaking to her, she would ask him for a drink and would receive instead living water. She, like Nicodemus, is not yet on the same plane of conversation. Living water, in

the common parlance of that time, was simply water that was flowing, as from a spring or in a creek or river.

Jesus tells this woman, “Everyone who drinks the water from this well will be thirsty again, but those who drink the water I give will never again be thirsty. Indeed, that water will become inside them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The woman wants that water so that she will never be thirsty and so that she can stop making that difficult and arduous trek to this ancient well, to draw water. She and Jesus are still talking past each other.

There follows a brief conversation in which Jesus tells the woman that she has had five husbands and now lives with a man who is not her husband. Note carefully, though, that there is no condemnation in what Jesus says. There is no condemnation, only a statement of fact.

The woman is impressed and identifies Jesus as a prophet, but immediately changes the subject. Perhaps, she feels, if this man is a prophet she can begin to discuss theological questions with him. She wants to discuss the proper physical location of worship, because, as noted before, for Samaritans that place is on Mount Gerazim, but for Jews it is Jerusalem. A rather odd turn of the conversation, to be sure.

Jesus won’t talk about physical locations or temples. He says instead, “Woman, the hour is coming, and is even now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such are the ones the Father seeks. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.”

The woman makes another dramatic leap, to another theological topic: “I know that the Christ is coming. When he comes, he will make all things clear.” Jesus replies, “I AM he, the one who is speaking to you.” Amazingly, Jesus reveals fully his identity to this Samaritan woman, whose nation and gender are reviled by Jews. How very odd. Apparently nation, gender, level of education, and state of sinfulness matter little to Jesus. He is instead looking for those who will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. He is looking for those who will recognize him as the source of living water that gives abundant, eternal life. And he is looking for those who will recognize him for who he is, the Christ, the Son of God.

In the Greek text, after her statement about the Christ coming, Jesus says to the woman simply “I AM.” One of those famous “I AM” sayings in the gospel of John, reminding his readers immediately of the words of God to Moses on Mount Sinai. Whenever Jesus utters one of his “I AM” statements in John, he reminds his readers that he is God.

The woman hurries from the well back to the village, telling the people who look down on her that she has met a man who told her everything she had ever done. “He cannot be the Christ. Can he?” Even though he has said so, she is still not ready to believe. But she has come a very, very long way in just a few minutes. And like Nicodemus, she will never again be the same.

There are some of us here who are like this woman. Some of you have been considered

outsiders at some time in your life, or perhaps even now. You have been rejected by others for one reason or another. Perhaps you now or then avoided contact with others, fearing their looks of disdain, their obvious rejection. As you read this passage, can you sense the indelible love of Jesus for this woman? It is almost blatant. Jesus does not condemn her for being a woman or Samaritan or uneducated or socially outcast. He engages her in deep conversation and reveals to her who he really is.

You may remember from last week that Jesus chides Nicodemus a bit, for being as dense as he is. He is a teacher of Israel – why is he having such a hard time understanding what Jesus is saying? There is no such condemnation for this outcast Samaritan woman. Jesus’ patience with her seems to have no boundaries.

If you are, or have been, the woman of Samaria, rest in the assurance that Jesus loves you infinitely, and wishes to share with you also the living water that gushes up to eternal life. He wishes you also, to worship in spirit and in truth. He longs to be in conversation with you, too.

From chapter one, verse one, to the very end of his gospel, John strives so very mightily to convey to his readers who this Jesus really is. The story of the Samaritan woman is one of many encounters, one of many conversations, that Jesus has with those he meets in his journeys. Elsewhere in John Jesus utters long discourses as he tells his disciples or others who he is and why he has come.

Remember the words of chapter one: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word WAS God.” Then a little later in the same chapter, “The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth...It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”

From beginning to end, with care and with passion, John declares this Jesus to be not just the Christ, not just the Son of God, but fully and truly God.

And that is who the Samaritan woman meets at the well. The man who told her everything she ever did. The man who claims to be the source of living water that gushes up into eternal life. The man who tells her that all worshipers, Samaritan, Jewish, American, Cambodian, Chilean, Russian, or Ugandan, must worship in spirit and in truth.

I will be the first to admit that I don’t fully understand what it means to worship in spirit and in truth, but I do know that it means more than going through the motions. And I believe that it means corporate worship, as we are engaged in this morning, but it also means an internal, private worship that grows more and more intense, more and more deep, as we abide in Jesus.

May each one of you, and all of us together, drink deeply of the living water that gushes up to eternal life. That would be the water that only Jesus can give. Amen.