

In last week's reading, we heard Jesus in conversation with a consummate insider: Nicodemus, a "leader of the Jews," a man of Jerusalem. This week, Jesus has left Judea and, in Samaria, engages in conversation a Samaritan woman—the epitome of an outsider. This conversation is much longer, and while Nicodemus initially misunderstands Jesus and then fades out of the picture, the Samaritan woman first misunderstands Jesus and then gradually comprehends, becoming an evangelist. It seems like a deliberate contrast—all the more when you look harder at the details.

We all know that Jews and Samaritans hated each other. This antipathy went way back to before the Exile, when Assyrians conquered the area north of Judea and imported a lot of non-Jews into the land. The population that resulted thought of themselves as Jews, but didn't worship at the Temple in Jerusalem or accept any of the scriptures besides the Torah. When Judean exiles returned and wanted to rebuild the Temple, they rebuffed the offers of help from these local Jews who had developed so differently from them, and bad blood got worse. Someone other than Jesus would probably have taken a longer route to get to Galilee, just to avoid crossing through Samaria, but Jesus is notoriously unpredictable, as we have already seen.

There's also a significant literary convention being employed here. When we see a movie in which two people bump into each other, drop their groceries and get angry at each other, know that this will be a romantic comedy. When we see two dissimilar people forced into an unwilling alliance, we know we're watching a buddy story. In the same way, when a woman and a man meet each other at a well in the

Bible, we know that they are going to get engaged. That's how Jacob met one of his wives—ostensibly at this very well. That's how Moses met one of his wives. A meeting at a well signals impending marriage. But Jesus, as I said, is unpredictable.

So he runs into this woman and asks her for a drink, and then tells her that although she can get him regular water, he can supply *her* with living water, “gushing up to eternal life.” He keeps saying these cryptic things, which she misunderstands, but she pursues the conversation, trying to pick up the thread. When he tells her that he knows she has no husband—that she's had five and is now with someone not her husband—she recognizes him as a prophet. Now, this woman is not promiscuous or unfaithful. Most likely she has been divorced four times, and the reason a man would divorce her is that she's barren. She can't have children. The fifth husband has died, and she has been given to his surviving brother under levirate law. In other words, this woman has been abandoned five times for being worthless. Jesus recognizes her, but makes no judgment. She knows he's a prophet. By telling her who she is, he reveals who he is.

Family therapists say that strong relationships aren't built on shared values or interests so much as on self-revelation. Enduring relationships are built when people show themselves to another, are not rebuffed or misunderstood, and see more of the other. There's more going on here than just that—lots more—but I want to pause on this. Jesus sees the shame and marginality of this Samaritan woman, and does not think it's important. Fully aware of how /dismissable/ she is, he settles down to have a long conversation with her about matters of ultimate concern which, as it happens, he is offering her for free. She never has a chance to

develop imposter syndrome. He gets her, clearly, and gets that there's *more* to her: she is a child of God who craves and will receive living water. Who but the Messiah would see *all* of her?

The disciples acquit themselves well in this story. They catch up with Jesus, see him talking with a woman at a well, put two and two together, and do NOT say, "What are you doing!?" Jesus is breaking all the rules. He's having a deeply personal encounter with a woman at a well, but not to pursue marriage. He's there to take her seriously as a whole person. Just as the male disciples left their fishing boats behind, she leaves her water jar behind as she goes to tell her neighbors what she's seen. And listen to what she says: "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" It's a question, not a conclusion. They have to "come and see" too, because you have to bring your whole self to the one who offers living water. You can't order it from Amazon.

The rest of the residents of this Samaritan city do come to Jesus; they ask him to stay with them, and he stays not one but two days. They say to the woman, "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." Jesus and this woman have breached and overcome every boundary you can think of: ethnic, religious, gender, and the history of violent conflict between their communities. There's another boundary I don't quite have language for—the boundary of her shame for being so inadequate as a wife that she was rejected four times. The other boundaries were obvious and undeniable: everyone knows Jewish men and Samaritan women have nothing to talk about together. There's no need to reveal such a personal,

embarrassing deficiency as her own individual unworthiness. But it turns out that Jesus knows it and doesn't see any reason to treat that as something important about her. He crosses that boundary as well, and it just goes away.

There's a story about the Hindu god Krishna, that he played a trick on the cow-herd maidens who are his frequent companions. When they were bathing in a river, he snuck up and stole the clothes they had left on the riverbank and hung them in a nearby tree. In order to retrieve their clothes, they had to get out of the river and expose their nakedness. I don't love that story because I associate sexual assault with what he did, but what Hindu tradition says is that this story reminds us that we should trust God with our whole selves, not hide anything away. And maybe that story and my own reservations about it underline the insight of the woman at the well: we *do* have good reason to protect ourselves by keeping some things private. It's dangerous to expose yourself, and some things about ourselves even we don't like. BUT the fact is that God already knows us entirely, even the things we don't want to show, and thinks that we are perfectly splendid, wants to give us living water that gushes up to eternal life.

It seems that boundary-breaking and disregard for hierarchies of human value are the spiritual practices that prepare us to trust the boundless grace of God. We should go out into the world looking for barriers to ignore, so that it becomes second nature to see others as the beloved children of God, and ourselves as well, shame-less and glad.

God of life, Shower us in your living water, bringing us to new life, fresh and clean. Walk with us as we share the knowledge of your living water with others, so that all might live. Amen.