

Crossing Boundaries

John 4:5-42

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You

worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the city and were on their way to him. Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.” Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said 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.”

Today’s Gospel couldn’t be more different from last Sunday’s. Last week, you’ll recall, Nicodemus visited Jesus by night to ask how he could gain admission to the kingdom of heaven. Jesus replied that Nicodemus must be “born again” or “born from above.” But even though this conversation took

place at night, there was nothing illicit about it; both Jesus and Nicodemus were Jewish males.

Today, however, we have a very different encounter: a Jewish man with a Samaritan woman. That simply didn't happen in first-century Palestine. It would be like oil and water; Jews and Samaritans simply didn't fraternize. In this case, Jesus was traveling from Judea in the South back to Galilee in the North. The most direct route was through Samaria, but Jews typically circumvented Samaria in order to avoid contact with the Samaritans. Jesus, however, chose to travel directly through Samaria, even though it violated conventions and customs. Prejudices run deep in that part of the world, both then and now.

Some years ago, for example, I was asked by the State Department to represent the United States at an interfaith conference in Lebanon. I arrived in Beirut, settled into my hotel, and headed for the first session. Initially, I was very impressed with the diversity of participants: Sunni, Shia, and Druze Muslims, Maronite Christians, Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, Roman Catholics. During the next session, however, it occurred to me that one major faith was missing from the conversation: Judaism. And when a Muslim woman tried to make a presentation to the group, she was shouted down and silenced by the other (male) delegates.

Lines and boundaries are regarded as something close to sacred in that part of the world. So when Jesus engaged a Samaritan woman in broad daylight, he was courting danger and flirting with scandal. Even the woman is taken aback at Jesus' brazenness. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" she asks.

In his encounter with the woman at the well, Jesus begins by requesting a drink of water. And in the course of the exchange Jesus tells her about living water – that is, water that is not stagnant – and quickly the conversation moves from the empirical world to the realm of the metaphysical. That is to say that both participants in the exchange shift into a conversation about spiritual matters.

Once again, the contrast with last week's Gospel is instructive. When Jesus tells Nicodemus, a learned man, that he must be "born again" to enter the kingdom of heaven, Nicodemus stubbornly insists on a literal interpretation of Jesus' words, asking, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" But while Nicodemus remains doggedly literal, the Samaritan woman understands what Jesus means when he refers to himself as "living water." "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again," Jesus says, nodding in the direction of the well, "but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

The conversation then reverts to the here and now. Jesus baits the woman and asks her to summon her husband. She has no husband, it turns out – or, rather, she has had five husbands, and the man she now lives with is not her husband. Now, can you imagine how a fundamentalist or a Pharisee would respond to this disclosure? "You sinner! You're disgusting! Get out of my sight!"

But Jesus does no such thing. Instead, he engages her in a conversation about the messiah and affirms that he, Jesus, is that messiah: "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

And then something wonderfully symbolic happens. The Samaritan woman, the person to whom Jesus, a Jewish man, should never have engaged in conversation, leaves something at the well: her water jar.

There was no running water in first-century Palestine, so it was the daily task of women to venture out to the well, in public, in what was considered male space, and collect water for the household. She toted her water jar to the well, filled it, and carried it home. Water is heavy, of course, sloshing around. Collecting and carrying water was an arduous task, so a water jar,

for women in first-century Palestine, symbolized work and labor and the burdens of domestic life.

Following her conversation with Jesus, however, the Samaritan woman left her water jar at the well. Her encounter with Jesus had liberated her from her labor, from the guilt of her many relationships, and she left her burdens behind.

The Jesus we encounter in the Gospels is a Jesus who crosses boundaries and invites us to do the same – the boundaries of gender and class and race and geography and religion. Jesus opts for compassion over custom and convention. A conversation between a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman was frowned upon in the first century, not unlike conversations these days between Christians and Muslims or Jews and Arabs. But Jesus defies convention and reaches out in compassion, not condemnation.

The Samaritan woman left her water jar at the well. And then she returned to the city to tell everyone about the remarkable man she had encountered, the man who had not condemned her but instead offered her living water. John records that “Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony.”

How many of us, I wonder, still carry around our water jars? Our guilt over past mistakes or failed relationships. Our regret about missed opportunities or thwarted ambitions. Jesus knows all about it, just as he knew about the woman’s five husbands, and he says, “that’s okay, leave your old water jar by the well and have some fresh water, some living water.”

If we do that, if we partake of living water, we too will have much to tell about our encounter with Jesus.

Third Sunday in Lent

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Christ Church
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