

“Come and See as Jesus Sees”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Edina Morningside Community Church; February 4, 2018

John 4:1-42

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John” —although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— he left Judea and started back to Galilee.

But he had to go through Samaria. 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.”

We start today with a puzzle of biblical geography. John's gospel says that Jesus had to go through Samaria, but that's just not the case. In the last chapter, Jesus was in Jerusalem and had that midnight conversation with the Jewish leader Nicodemus. Now we're told that he leaves Judea and goes north again to Galilee. Any reasonable traveler between those two regions would have used either the coastal route along the Mediterranean, or the inland route along the Jordan River. Both are well-established paths of trade and travel, easier to navigate than the high hill country between them and to the east, which was Samaria. So when John writes that Jesus "had to go through Samaria", that's like a travel agent sending you from Minneapolis to Duluth, through Fargo. Something else is afoot. If Jesus *does* have to go through Samaria, it's because of who he will meet there.

The woman Jesus encounters at a Samaritan well could hardly be more opposite of Nicodemus, whose story we heard last Sunday. Nicodemus is a Jewish man; she is a Samaritan woman—their tribes have been hostile to one another for centuries. Nicodemus meets Jesus by night; she meets Jesus at high noon. Nicodemus is a respected religious leader, a Pharisee. She's apparently an outsider in her community, not permitted to draw water in the morning with other women. From her conversation with Jesus, we learn that she's been married five times, and the man she's with now refuses to marry her. The most likely reason for this is that the woman is unable to bear children, so one man after another divorces her and turns her out to be homeless. She's apparently a woman who has been abandoned often. She's probably learned to fend for herself, put on a stiff upper lip, and act like she's got nothing left to lose. She lives "with broken dreams", in a phrase of writer Edith Sinclair Downing, for the hymn excerpted below.¹

Who do you know that lives with broken dreams, yourself or another? Perhaps it's a relationship gone bad, marked by abuse and misuse, or the gradual hardening of hearts into silence and distance. Are they the broken dreams of a career path not taken, a long season of loneliness, or a loved one lost too soon? Or perhaps we feel the broken dreams of our country and world, overwhelmed by the scale of poverty, climate change, gun violence and refugee resettlement. Approval ratings for elected leaders show that our hopes have grown cold because high-ranking politicians value party more than country, and leave us cynically divided among ourselves. What are the broken dreams whose pieces you hold in your heart? What happens now?

*When, like the woman at the well,
I lived with broken dreams,
Christ came to me, good news to tell,
of everlasting streams.*

Neither Jesus nor the Samaritan woman behave as society tells them they must, and in their connection new possibilities are born. Their conversation with her breaks the bounds of cultural convention in multiple ways: a woman talking to a man alone, he a Jew and she a Samaritan. In short, this is the last person Jesus "should" be talking with. Yet she and Jesus treat each other as equals. They have witty banter around the multiple meanings of water and worship. She offers him her bucket to draw water from the well, and he offers her the living water of God's eternal love. Jesus wouldn't have had water if she hadn't been there, and she wouldn't have had the other kind. They each meet a need in the other, by crossing the common cultural expectations that would keep them apart. They form strange community at a table that is unlike any other, a table of mutual honoring, of connection at the heart.

One of the things I feel privileged to say each time we gather for communion is that *all* are welcome to this food and drink. It thrills me to say that "you don't need to be a member of this church, or any church, to receive the bread and cup at this table." It is the gift of Christ's presence and he gives it as freely as the grace of God, with no preconditions or requirements for entry. Therefore, the church that gathers around

¹ "When, Like the Woman at the Well", *The New Century Hymnal* #196 (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press), 1995.

this table is one of the few places in our society where people come together who have a great deal or only a little, who are black, white, brown or another magnificent shade, who live in suburbs, or downtown, or wherever their car is parked, who support the Vikings, Packers, Patriots, Eagles, or none of the above. We each come from our own experiences, but are no longer defined by them, encountering God at this table in the face of neighbor and stranger alike. By divine grace, in these moments we are *not* divided from one another, but are connected to form from this a *new* community called into transformative relationships with those of other tribes. This table is a watering well for wounded hearts, connecting Jews and Samaritans today. Here we gather with our broken dreams, and we offer God to one another.

*Christ knew my heart, my wayward ways,
yet gave me hope, not fear.
The God I once thought far away,
I could approach, draw near.*

Once welcomed by Jesus at the well, once nurtured by the living water of his love, does the woman simply stay there, transfixed by divine grace? No—remember what she does next, after this transforming moment? She goes out and invites all of her people to experience for themselves. “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” The Samaritan woman becomes the first apostle—the first messenger—to carry the good news of Jesus as Messiah. She is a most unlikely evangelist, but that’s what makes her most fit for it. And her invitation comes not to the righteous leaders—not to the people like Nicodemus who have a hard time believing because they’re insiders. Rather, she went to other Samaritans, other down-and-out people, and “many” came to faith because of what she shared.

*Since now I am in grace immersed,
set free, forgiven, whole,
I share with those who are athirst
the well-springs of my soul!*

Jesus did not *have* to go through Samaria—he *chose* to. And because he went out of his way to meet this woman, to receive her hospitality and extend his own, the entire community was transformed. Let us then—as we have been graciously received and healed—go to those places of division and brokenness which we might rather avoid. Let us follow in this woman’s footsteps, inviting others to “come and see”. Let the vision of Christianity that people see in us and in the church be broad enough and transformative enough to encompass the grace we ourselves have come to know in Jesus. Let our private conduct, our community service, and our public participation as citizens in this democracy, be manifestations of the thirst-quenching water we’ve come to know in Jesus. Let us go to all the Samarias that we have to go through, perhaps because they are unavoidable, or perhaps because that’s where we *must* show up for the grace of God to be revealed. Amen.