

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd  
Lent 3  
March 15, 2020

Courtship  
John 4:5-30, 39-42

One hot day a stranger wanders into town, sits down at a well, and strikes up a conversation with a solitary woman who has come to get some water. The place of their meeting is called Jacob's Well, because that is where Jacob first met Rachel and fell in love with her.

Wells in general figure prominently in the courtship stories of the Bible. At a well one evening, the time of day "when the women go out to draw water," Abraham's servant courted Rebekkah by proxy for Isaac. At a well in the Midian, Moses watered the sheep of the seven daughters of the priest of Midian, and ended up marrying Zipporah, one of those daughters. If you were a young man in search of a suitable bride, showing up at a well when the young women were likely to bring their sheep or cattle to be watered was the ancient world's equivalent of Internet dating.

What is lacking in the courtship stories of Isaac, Jacob and Moses was anything you could call real conversation. Any conversation was carried out between the suitors and the young women's fathers, who gave their consent to a marriage and settled on a dowry.

The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well is not a courtship but a conversation – in fact, the longest recorded conversation Jesus has with anyone in the Gospels. When you look at the facts of the situation, it is remarkable that any conversation at all took place. In the social world of both the woman and Jesus, this was a highly unsuitable conversation, a conversation that should not have happened.

First of all, a Jewish man did not initiate a conversation with an unknown woman – to do so was just plain improper. Second, a Jewish teacher, for that is what Jesus was,

did not engage in public conversation with *any* woman. And finally, Jews did not invite contact with Samaritans.

When Jesus went through Samaria to get to Jerusalem, he was knowingly traveling through enemy territory. The enmity between Jews and Samaritans went back several centuries. It began with the conquest of Judah by Babylon in the sixth century BC. After the nobility, the priests, and other elites went into exile, the men left in the land began marrying foreign women. Later, when the people returned from exile to rebuild the temple of Jerusalem, Ezra and Nehemiah thundered against these "mixed" marriages and demanded that the men of Israel divorce their foreign wives as a kind of "ethnic cleansing." Some of the men refused. The tensions between these two groups festered for centuries. Not only did the Jews look down on the Samaritans, but Jews and Samaritans also had a long-standing disagreement about where you were supposed to worship. The Samaritans worshiped on Mount Gerizim, but the Jews worshiped in Jerusalem.

The Samaritan woman would have had all this in her mind when she said to Jesus, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" In other words, "You're not from around here, are you?" *What kind of ignorant bumpkin has just wandered into the watering place, saying, "Howdy, ma'am, can I have a drink of water?"* Maybe the woman thought he was hitting on her.

It is customary for interpreters of this story to treat the woman as a notorious sinner. The reason she came out at noon, in the hottest part of the day, was because she was a social outcast in her community, a woman with such a disordered life that she didn't dare to come out in the evening when the respectable women came to fill their water jars. But there is no indication that Jesus sees her this way. He does not judge her or tell her to change her ways. What he does is engage her in a conversation.

It is not an easy conversation. She responds testily at first. Jesus doesn't make matters any easier for her with his remark about "living water." As in the encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus is talking on one level and the woman is talking on another, which serves to increase her confusion and sense of exasperation. "You don't have a bucket," she says to him. "Where are you going to get that 'living water'?" Somewhere along the line, though, there's a breakthrough. She still doesn't get his meaning about the living water, but she does understand that he's offering her something she needs. Somehow, across the divide of gender, religion and ethnicity, Jesus is reaching this woman and she is responding.

Her excitement grows when he gives his account of her marital history. She identifies Jesus as a prophet. She has an inquisitive nature, this woman; now that she sees him as a prophet, she takes the conversational lead and begins asking him about the religious differences between Jews and Samaritans. This, it seems, will be the point at which they both recognize their irreconcilable differences, and part company. But Jesus is not going to let her go so easily. "Let's not quibble over *where* true worship takes place: let's define *what* it is. It's more about the presence of the Spirit of God than about where you go to church." The woman is not yet convinced. "Be that as it may," she says. "When the Messiah comes, he will clear these things up for us."

That's when Jesus drops his bombshell: "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." How inconvenient for the disciples to show up at just that moment! Maybe the woman wanted to hear Jesus expand a bit on what he had just said. But she has heard enough to know that something decisive has happened in her understanding, and she becomes the Gospel's first missionary, running back to town to tell everyone she knows about the unusual Jewish man who just might be the Messiah. After spending some time with him themselves, the other Samaritans pronounce him the Savior of the world.

Now, if you were to say, Well, that's not really believing in Jesus – just because this woman was impressed by his ability to turn his x-ray vision on her life, that's not the same thing as faith – you would be right. All through the Gospel Jesus keeps reminding people not to focus on the "signs," the miracles, but to focus on him.

But the Samaritan woman's excitement about him, her willingness to take the news to others, and their willingness to listen to her, is a start. In fact, it's the beginning of something huge and unstoppable. As Jesus repeatedly crosses the boundaries of what is considered proper and acceptable, the news about this strange new presence in the world spreads. Now and again, there is an encounter that leads to genuine faith.

Someone I know once described Jesus as the "ultimate immigrant." If I understand his meaning, he was saying that Jesus is the one who came into the world as a stranger, someone the world did not recognize. He is the ultimate border-crosser, the one who came from his rightful place in heaven to travel through the enemy territory of earth, where he was almost consistently distrusted, scorned, rejected, or driven out. Eventually he was chased out of human society altogether, allotted a place with the criminals and outcasts on Calvary Hill. Once in a while, though, he made contact and broke through – with a healing, a word, a conversation with another stranger. It was his dangerous border-crossing that got him killed, but that didn't stop the work of reconciliation he came to do. "When I am high and lifted up from the earth," he says elsewhere in John's Gospel, "I will draw all people to myself." (12:32)

This is how the letter to the Ephesians describes it:

"in Christ Jesus [those] who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has....broken down the dividing wall [of]

hostility [between us]...that he might create in himself one new humanity... [reconciling all of us] to God in one body through the cross" (2:13-16).

The first words of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman get recast over and over again:

"Why are you, a Muslim, talking with me, a Christian?"

"Why are you, a fundamentalist, talking with me, a progressive?"

"Why are you, a Republican, talking with me, a Democrat?"

"Why are you, a Pakistani, talking with me, an Indian?"

And on and on it goes, and most of the time it never turns into a real conversation, as the parties guard their positions across the border that separates them. But Jesus has come to break down the dividing wall that separates human beings from each other and from God.

So maybe you could say that the encounter at Jacob's Well between Jesus and the Samaritan woman was a courtship after all. Through the love of God in the person of Jesus Christ, a dividing wall was breached, communication took place, and living water was poured out. Something fresh and new bloomed into life. And that water is poured for us today, water that does not give out, but gushes up to eternal life