

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
February 16, 2020
Title: Living Waterⁱ
Scripture: John 4:5-42

He came by night approaching Jesus cautiously. He had an idea what it would cost him to find out more about Jesus. At the end of their conversation, we still don't know what Nicodemus is thinking. We met him in last week's sermon. Later in John's gospel, we meet Nicodemus twice more. On one occasion he is defending Jesus on a point of law – later he is helping to prepare Jesus' body for burial. He is accompanied by Joseph of Arimathea who is described as a follower of Jesus' but secretly for fear of the authorities.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the woman at the well in Samaria. While Nicodemus comes to find Jesus at night, Jesus is the one who makes the trip to Samaria. He meets the woman not at night but in the middle of the day – around noontime, when the sun is bright. But in both cases, they are the only two around. Jesus' disciples had gone into the town to try to get some food. This, at least, begins as a private conversation.

We know Nicodemus' name, and his status as a ruler, a religious authority, but the woman is anonymous. We call her the "Samaritan Woman" as if there were only one Samaritan woman in the whole world.

We call her the “woman at the well” which is really not much different than saying, “the woman at Target or Stop & Shop”. Jesus and Nicodemus really do share a cultural and social world. They are both observant Jews, learned in their religious tradition. But Jesus and the woman represent cultures that deeply mistrust each other and share a mutual hostility.

Although Samaria lay directly between Galilee to the north and Judea to the south, Jews traveling between the two areas would often go far out of their way. They would cross the Jordan River and go around Samaria to avoid traveling through the area. But Jesus and his disciples have traveled directly through Samaria. It seems that it is intentional that Jesus should be in Samaria.

When we encounter these stories we are still quite near the beginning of John’s gospel. Nicodemus shows up in chapter 3 and the woman in chapter 4. The fourth gospel tends to give us more one-on-one conversations than the other gospels. This conversation between Jesus and the woman is longer than any other in the Bible. I think that’s John’s way of telling us that this encounter is particularly significant. Through these two stories – and especially the contrast between them – the writer of the fourth Gospel begins to reveal the enormous consequences of being confronted with the presence of Jesus.

The story started with the Jews but in the encounter with Nicodemus we hear the very familiar verse that, “God so loved the **world** that he gave his only Son, so that **everyone** who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” In the meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well, we start to encounter the Son interacting with the world beyond the Jewish community.

An important part of the discussion focuses around the proper place to worship and we hear that the “hour is coming, and now is, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.” Eugene Peterson’s The Message puts it this way, “The time is coming – it has, in fact, come – when what you’re called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter. It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship.” We quickly learn that what was said in the third chapter about God’s love was not just a nice saying, but that it is absolutely true. God’s love is not only for the Jews, but also for the entire world.

In John’s gospel, Jesus frequently talks in metaphors and typically he is misunderstood. Both Nicodemus and the woman at the well were

sidetracked by this kind of conversation. They both immediately focused on the practical, the literal interpretation of what Jesus was saying. We, too, do not always understand what it is that Christ offers to us. Like both Nicodemus and the woman, we may think in terms of our physical needs or our convenience. Nicodemus was confused by the idea of being born from above.

This conversation gets confused by the discussion of water. For women in Jesus time, going to the well at least twice a day to get water was a big deal. The water jugs were heavy and the idea of not having to be thirsty again would certainly be appealing to this woman, especially since she is at the well in the middle of the day.

Most of the women in the village would come in the early morning or early evening when it was cooler. They would gather at the well for a time of socializing while they carried out their important daily chores. This was the time to find out who was sick, or who was having a baby, or what marriage plans were being made. This was the time when information was shared and relationships nurtured. Most commentators assume that because this woman was at the well in the middle of the day, when the sun was the hottest, that she was quite likely an outcast and didn't participate in the intimate social life of the community.

Nicodemus, by contrast, was a highly respected member of the community, and of the religious establishment. If we were to set these stories in today's culture, it would be more like our District Superintendent or Bishop seeking out Jesus in the middle of the night for a private meeting being contrasted with Jesus going into the streets of Providence or Boston to the bridges or alleys where the homeless seek shelter from the weather. Jesus might be offering a coat that never wears out, or a cup of soup that never gets cold or runs out, or a shelter that is always warm and safe. Surely, a homeless person would want what Jesus was offering and would hear the offer in very concrete specific terms.

The water, coat, soup or shelter that he might be offering is not literal water, coat, soup or shelter. A few weeks ago, we focused on the temptation story of Jesus in the wilderness. One of the temptations was to turn rocks into bread and satisfy his great hunger. At the time I suggested that this was more than simply a temptation to physically feed himself; it was also a temptation to feed the world, to gain popularity and following by satisfying the physical needs of the people. While meeting the physical needs is really important – what Jesus has to offer is even more than that.

The water – the living water that Jesus offers the Samaritan woman – is more than water that satisfies the physical thirst. We, humans, spend

much of our lives looking for meaning and purpose. We look for satisfaction and fulfillment – and we look in many different places. We look to possessions, and relationships, status, power, you name it. We think that a little more of whatever it is we have identified, will satisfy our thirst and we will be happy, fulfilled, satisfied. Jesus is telling the woman at the well, that the living water, that which will really satisfy her thirst – her spiritual thirst – is a relationship with him. She will still need physical water from the well. A homeless person would still need a warm coat, soup or shelter. We will still need to satisfy our physical needs.

The living water that Jesus offers is the water that touches our very being – it is that which makes it possible for us to get out of bed in the morning even after someone we love has died. It is that which makes it possible for us to go through the dark times of our lives knowing that we are not alone. In the midst of our daily struggles it is easy to get sidetracked like the woman did and focus on the practical needs and miss the real presence of Christ with us.

When the woman asked Jesus for the water, he told her to go get her husband and come back. I suspect that at least part of what Jesus is doing here is recognizing that a conversion, a change in someone's life cannot happen in isolation. When a person discovers and receives the living water

– it cannot be a secret. A relationship with Christ that grows and makes a difference in our lives will make a difference in our relationships as well. We will start thinking differently, acting differently, looking at social and ethical issues in a different way – and we will find that we need to share that with those who are important to us.

That's where another important contrast between Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman arises. Remember that we don't really know what Nicodemus did after he spoke with Jesus. By all indications, he became a follower of Jesus but he was very low key about it – pretty much to the point of keeping it mostly a secret. The Samaritan woman, on the other hand, had a very different reaction. After talking with Jesus she went running back to the village to tell everyone about Jesus and what he had said to her.

The woman left her water jug behind, just as Peter and John had left their fishing boats behind. She had found something that propelled her forward to share with others the exciting news. Can you think of a time in your life when you have been touched by the hand of God in such a way that it takes you out of yourself and fills you with a desire to share the good news?

Sometimes we make excuses about witnessing to others because we claim that they are not ready to hear or believe. Jesus makes it clear that there are always people who are ready – and eager to hear good news in their lives. This is true for every generation of Christians. None of us starts at square one of the Christian pilgrimage through history, but we enter into the previous life and mission of the church that brought the faith to us and then it becomes our own story and mission. Many came to believe in Jesus because of the word that the woman brought to them. We come, too, because of the stories of others, but soon the story must become our own.

Jesus met her one-on-one. That's the single best way to approach anyone about spiritual matters. Classroom teaching, Bible Studies are important, but often when Christ speaks to our hearts, it is when we are alone with Christ. When we allow ourselves to be so busy that we cannot or will not be alone with Christ, we cut ourselves off from the real communion of the heart – the opportunity for Christ to speak with us one-on-one.

Jesus knew everything about the woman, just as he knows everything about us, but he desires one-on-one time with us. Do you think it was an accident that Jesus arrived at the well at noontime, to find a

woman alone, a woman who was thirsty? It is no accident that Jesus tries to get our attention – one-on-one, alone, to fill our thirst.

Jesus refused to accept a division of people – for him there was only one group, children of God and anyone who worshipped God in spirit and truth could drink of the living water. What are we to do with this story? First, we should realize that Jesus offers a consistent call to new life, to come to drink of the living water, to worship God in spirit and in truth, regardless of who you are. After drinking of the water, we are to extend that invitation to all, regardless of who they are.

ⁱ This sermon is a combination of a sermon preached 02/24/2008 at the North Kingstown UMC and updates for today.