

John 4:5-26 The Samaritan Woman
March 12, 2023

The bible is filled with familiar stories such as the ones we are being reminded about in the Lenten study of the Patriarchs in the Book of Genesis; Abraham tested, Jacob's dream at Bethel, Joseph and his many-colored coat. There are many more; Noah's Ark, Moses at the Burning Bush or the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments, Samson and Delilah, David and Goliath, the paralytic at Capernaum being lowered down through a hole in the roof, the Raising of Lazarus, the Prodigal Son.

All these and more have captured the human imagination and been sculpted and painted and etched into stained glass for centuries. In part, it is because they help people better understand what we see through a glass darkly, the truth about that in which we live and move and have our being.

One such story comes from the Gospel of John, which has become meaningful for us because it is depicted in the large stained and painted glass window we behold each Sunday as we depart from this sanctuary. It is the Woman at the Well.

It is proclaimed to us only in the Gospel of John. Jesus has changed water to wine at a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and then gone down to Jerusalem for the Passover. There has been a disturbance at the Temple, and he engaged in a very interesting conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus.

There is an episode about John the Baptist. By this time in the story, readers are steeped in well-known Christian imagery and language, "For God so loved the world that he gave . . ." The gospels are especially meaningful at this time of the year called Lent, when their biography of Jesus is emphasized.

The story is an interesting one for several reasons. It happens in Samaria as Jesus and his companions return to Galilee after the Passover, heading out in the more direct route through Samaria rather than the more common one around it on the eastern side of the Jordan River. One thinks of the rivalry between Samaritans and Jews.

It involves an encounter with a woman. In the picture at the rear of the sanctuary, she is easy to make out as a woman, but there doesn't seem to be anything about her that distinguishes her as a Samaritan. She looks like all the other women in the pictures of the biblical stories.

There are several elements to the dialogue. First, *that there is* a conversation is remarkable, because she is a Samaritan Woman. I am probably going to make too big of a fuss about this aspect of their meeting, but the conversation itself is meaningful. He asks her for a drink from Jacob's Well, and before one knows it the topic changes into a discussion of living water, the kind once consumed, the one who drinks never thirst again.

Then he addresses her about her husband, and she claims not to have one, a claim which he affirms because she has had five, not including her present companion, which means that he knew a little about her life.

She said, "I can see that you are a prophet," and inquired about the location of true worship, as if location is really all that important. It is interesting that she has such a question on her mind at all just waiting for someone to come along with an answer. "Are you the Messiah?" she asks him. And he tells her that he is, giving to a Samaritan woman an answer he hesitates to give to almost anyone else.

There is much to digest here in such a short story. Clearly, the two sets of images that are meant to capture our attention are, "living water," and, "spirit and truth." These compel us to take note of the spiritual nature of our lives, and to rise above the earthly circumstances associated with our experience of daily life.

Our days begin by turning on some lights and mindlessly enduring the modern technology of the bathroom, and closet, and kitchen, where basic needs are met and preparations are made for the day. In the course of a day there will likely be time spent in an automobile, and in front of a computer, television, on a cell phone. We will finish chores, make plans, enjoy pleasures and endure hardships, and take our meals, many of which are not possible without these technologies.

Technology, the mechanical side of life, has reached the point where the notion that life is spiritual can seem remote, and some have left it behind, imagining life as a machine instead, or a system. But there are dangers involved in that abandonment. Because life is about relationships, the best window through which to see into and better understand the realm of the spiritual, is relationships, not technology.

Let me suggest a couple of implications associated with the distinction between the world of technology and the world of relationships. First of all, though it is not always, probably never intended, the affect of technology has contributed to the gradual de-personalization of relationships. Herein lies a great danger; and also a great opportunity.

Here is where I would like to make a fuss about the nature of this encounter between Jesus and the woman. The two of them met at a well to get water. We get water out of bottle we buy at the store or from the tap which is the final step in a process the begins at a water plant, brought to us at some distance and through technical processes that make it safe to drink, and unnecessary to meet another person to acquire it.

A place to meet . . . has been replaced by a technology that does not require a meeting . . . the world is a little less personal. Automatic deposit and bill pay have the same affect. Even the use of modern technology in religion, which can make presence unnecessary, can have the affect of separating, isolating a person, not perhaps from God, but from

other people, other believers. The less that personal encounters are incidental like that, the less necessary they are, the more they will have to be sought intentionally.

The other suggestion is that, “spirit and truth,” require the proximity associated with personal encounters. Jesus and the Samaritan woman were separated across a great cultural and religious divide, between woman and man, Samaritan and Jew, but they shared physical space. It was a personal encounter in that space that breached the separation.

They were afforded by their thirst and the technology of their day an opportunity to meet face to face, at the level of their humanity. We all get thirsty.

Communication happened there. The word of the gospel is that such a meeting, that in Jesus Christ a meeting with God is like such a meeting, has the power of life over us. It is like a stream of living water, more than temporary in its power to bless.

Whatever else, “spirit and truth,” may mean, they mean this, that when people meet in a place of honest encounter and are able to communicate to each other something of their essence; they find God present there, and where God is present, and it can happen anywhere . . . healing, and forgiveness happens, reconciliation happens, the highest and best we can be in our humanity happens, salvation . . . true worship happens there.

The great stories of the Bible have in common that they describe meetings between people, and between people and their God, where living water is shared.

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