

This Gospel lesson is the story about the woman with a past, and it is important that we do not jump to conclusions about the Samaritan woman. Each of us has a past, with good and not so good memories.

Each of us, like the woman at the well, have been given blessings and challenges in life. The woman in today's gospel has a past. Most scholars now agree that being married five times spells a way that she was ostracized. Women in the ancient near eastern culture did not generally initiate divorce. Something has happened to this woman. She has made choices as well that led her to be at this well at the hottest part of the day. In the brightest light.

For most of my life, when I heard this story, I only thought about the woman standing at the well. She must be thirsty. I didn't know what the well symbolized. This was the place where Isaac's servant met Rebecca. This is not simply a well, this is a marriage well. Just two chapters ago in John's gospel we heard of Jesus' first miracle at a wedding in Cana.

So, imagine, sitting in a camp listening to John's Gospel, just a couple of chapters before we are hearing the story of a wedding. Then, this faithful Jewish man comes to *that* well and he meets a woman. This may sound like the equivalent of a Hallmark movie in our day, and people would expect a wedding. Yet, the plot twist is even bigger than expected. The wedding is not between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, but a wedding between two feuding groups of people: The Israelites and the Samaritans.

If I try to imagine being a Jew in the time of Jesus, I would expect Jesus to stop in a nice little Jewish community and share God's love with Jewish people. People like Nicodemus, who Jesus debated in John chapter 3. Instead, Jesus shares the message of God's love with a Samaritan woman.¹ Jesus is always doing something unexpected. This takes the cake. Jesus is supposed to fulfill the law, yet, we are seeing now that the covenant God made is being fulfilled with a larger group than could ever have been imagined. It is obvious in the place where Jesus meets the Samaritan woman; a place where God continued God's covenant years ago.

The well is a holy place for the Samaritans. In the same way, the Israelites have their temple as a holy place for them.² When Jesus tells the woman that she is going to be given living water, after some confusion, she realizes that the water is not about something she can drink. The living water Jesus gives her will heal her wounds. This woman who has been ostracized from society will be welcomed back because of Jesus.

Her time of struggle can come to a close because of this living water. It is no wonder that Jesus brings such joy to this woman.

We must have some understanding of the difficulties that the Samaritan woman has gone through, she has had five husbands. We know that Matthew and Luke tell a story of Jesus speaking about divorce. This is not the divorces of today; the covenants were broken far too easily. Only one party had the ability to control a marriage. Jesus speaks on this because there was a practice, based on Leviticus, that allowed men to give their wives certificates of divorce. The woman at the well had either been widowed or set aside five times. This was scandalous and I imagine it was painful. She is not the woman that I am expecting Jesus to talk with at a well in the daylight.

Most people did not go to the well at that time of the day, because it was hot, so her presence at the well indicates that she was apart from the community. The light of the day

¹ Lewis, K.M. (2014). *Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary: John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

² Wright, N.T. (2004). *John for Everyone*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press and Lewis, K.M. (2014). *Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary: John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

contrasted with the shadows from Nicodemus' story also tells us that Jesus meets us in the open.

Jesus talks for the woman longer than he speaks with anyone else in the gospels. This means he spends more time with a woman that is seen as his enemy than he does with people who are seen as inside the Jewish community. The love story that is being woven between fractured members of God's creation is one of faith and kindness.

As their conversation closes, Jesus gives the woman clarity that he reveals in similar ways later, seven times to be specific. Jesus tells this unnamed woman that he is the Messiah. The woman lights up in response to Jesus' words and tells everyone around her about her experience with Jesus.

Their response to her revelation is to find Jesus themselves, "when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. Many more believed because of his word,"³ The reunification of Israel and Samaria is beginning. It is not, at the end with the conclusion of this story. Sadly, Jews and Samaritans are not instantly at peace.

For that matter, there is no everlasting peace in the middle east. Jesus goes on to be crucified, died, and resurrected. We know that Christ will come again to complete the reunification. Our job now, as followers of Christ, is to preach the Gospel with our lives. Friends, we are the next chapter in this love story with Christ. I said at the beginning of this sermon that we all have a past. Part of our calling is to see what is going well in our hearts and what needs fine tuning.

The woman at the well saw that she was relying on the wrong thing: on the love of other men. She could not own property herself, earn a living, or maintain her own home. Still, this woman was reliant upon the grace of men while she drew well from the water.

When she leaves her bucket behind at the well, she begins a new path. She relies upon the love of God. Jesus is on a mission to bring all of God's people together. The Samaritan woman offers a good aspiration for all of us. While people often encounter barriers in life, she is able to persevere. Even though she has a lack of resources, and a past, an encounter with Jesus makes her a bold evangelist for the gospel.

God is always gracious, loving, and kind. St. Paul wrote in today's reading from Romans, "God proves God's love for all of us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us."⁴ All of us. Longhorns and Aggies. Rangers and Astros. Jews and Samaritans. In the same way that Jesus told Nicodemus he came to save the whole world, God loves the world. No one is too lost for God to find them. It is the truth of the greatest love story ever written. And we are part of that story. Amen.

³ John 4:39-40

⁴ Romans 5:8