

3rd Sunday in Lent (Year A)

John 4:5-42

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 worshipped 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 worshippers 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 labour. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labour.'

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 for 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.'

Stigmas come in many forms. One might be stigmatized for being a member of a particular political party. One might be stigmatized for being a “drunk” or a “meth head.” One might be stigmatized for coming to this island during the summer driving a Bentley and buying a large house that threatens the “quaint” history of this island. Yet another might be stigmatized simply for the color of their skin or for the times they’ve ended up in the police blotter. It’s a small island we live on and everyone knows everyone and ours is a community - like many others - where social stigmas creep into our heads in ways we may or not be aware of.

The woman in today’s story was stigmatized and, therefore, marginalized. First of all, she’s a woman in a man’s world. Secondly, we are not told her name. The socially privileged and “upright citizen” we saw in last week’s passage had a name attached to his story - his name was Nicodemus. But this woman’s name does not deserve our attention according to the social mores of that day. Secondly, she was stigmatized by her history. According to the text, she had had five husbands and the person she was living with was not one of them. Then, as it is now, men can be divorced multiple and remarried multiple times and no one bats an eye. However, a woman under the same situation is called things that I will not utter from this pulpit.

So here we have a woman who cannot bring herself to be seen by other people. To be certain, she had come to this well many times before. In started out that she would go to the well when everyone else did, either early in the morning or late in the afternoon, at the times that the sun was not so harsh. But then the rumors about her started to spread and she got tired of the insults. Water, after all, is heavy enough to carry even when you *don’t* have to shoulder the burdens of public ridicule.

And so, she stopped going to the well during rush hour. She was tired of being treated like she was filth. Perhaps her numerous husbands had done plenty of that already and the last thing she needed was everyone else doing it as well. It just wasn’t worth it. So she came to the well at noon. Because of her stigma, she came to draw water at the hottest part of the day, when she knew that the people who would judge her would be far away in the shade of their houses.

She must have been surprised to see this Jewish man sitting by the well alone at this hot hour. *Great*, she must have thought, *someone new to hurl insults at me!* She must have been praying that this stranger would ignore her and that she could quickly get the water she so desperately needed and then retreat to the safety of her home on the edge of town, sheltered - for a brief while at least - from the relentless insults at the scarlet letter everyone placed upon her.

She must have panicked when this Jewish stranger asked her for a drink of water. First of all, she was hoping to remain invisible. Secondly, it didn’t make sense. He was a Jew and she was a Samaritan. According to the social conventions of the day, these two people were not supposed to have contact with one another. Her being seen with another man - especially a Jewish man - would only add to the other myriad of rumors being circulated about her.

She finds herself in conversation with this Jewish man who tells her that it is not him who really needs water but *her* who needs a special kind of water, a “living water” that removes thirst for eternity. *That sounds great*, she thinks, *but where is his bucket?* Jesus tells her that the water he is talking about

cannot be carried in any vessel made by human hands but only in a sacred vessel created by God; particularly, the person she is staring at this very moment.

And as if she were not already confused enough, Jesus goes on to tell her everything about her - all the reasons that she felt the need to come to this well at noon instead of a cooler time of day. She can't believe it! This man must be a prophet! She leaves her bucket - a suggestion that she intends to return - and leaves to go find people to tell them about this man.

So much has changed in so little time. At the beginning of this story, the woman is doing everything in her power to *avoid* human contact. But now, after speaking with this stranger who has offered her eternal "living water," she goes out and tries to *find* other people! Quite the 180 if there ever was one. Her fear, it seems, has been replaced by hope. Such, it seems, is the work of the Gospel!

She goes and finds the closest people she can find and says "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" Her bewilderment is turning into belief, even if she doesn't yet understand it. She most likely did not fully understand what "living water" meant - and, let's be honest, do we? However, it was not her understanding but her curiosity that led her to belief. I, for one, find comfort in that. If belief only came from understanding then I don't know how much belief I would have! But if curiosity can lead to faith, then I find comfort in the fact that curiosity is in no short supply, I believe.

The text tells us that many Samaritans came to believe through her testimony. And her testimony was simple: *come and see*, she said. *Come and see the man who knows about everything I have ever done*. One might think that she would be ashamed of someone else knowing everything she'd ever done. We certainly all have parts of our lives that we're not proud of. However, she embraces the wonder and grace of the fact that this man took the time to get to know her and offer her living water *despite of* - or, perhaps, *because of* - the messy parts of her life. How wonderful it was to know that the brokenness of her life did not keep this stranger from seeing her as a human being in need of eternal life. That alone was a heck of a lot more than she got from anyone else!

She had been seen as a nobody but now she was *somebody*. Some door had been opened and she was invited to go through it at exactly a time in her life when every other door seemed to be shut in her face, lest her stigma "infect" the person on the other side of the wall. At a time when she was shunned, here was a person who embraced her and welcomed her to new life.

This passage from a commentary by Deborah J. Kapp speaks perfectly to this text:

This text is good news for anyone who has ever felt the humiliation of stigmatization or the pain of being a nobody, because Jesus does not turn away from this woman. On the contrary, he engages her in conversation, takes her seriously, and spends several days in her village. This woman, her community, and their welfare matter to Jesus, whether nobodies or not. That is good news.

It is also challenging news, because it reminds churches and their members that people who are nobodies to them may be somebodies in the eyes of Jesus. Who are those nobodies? They are the people we ignore. Maybe they are a congregation's neighbors, or the strangers who walk through the door, or a potential group to be evangelized and welcomed into the household of faith. This text reminds faithful readers that sometimes our attempts to draw the boundaries of the faith community are too narrow. We often prefer to leave out the nobodies, but Jesus does not do that. He welcomes outsiders, as well as insiders, into discipleship.

He also welcomes people who are just starting the journey of faith. The second characteristic of the woman is that she is a newcomer to faith, and during this conversation with Jesus she takes baby steps. Jesus is so patient with her! His willingness to explain his metaphors and stay with the conversation is in stark contrast to his impatient discussion with Nicodemus. Jesus does not make fun of this woman, as he does of Nicodemus, and he does not chastise her for her left-brain response to his right-brain language. Instead, he nurtures her, nudges her along, like a parent teaching a young child. Though he is hard on Nicodemus, Jesus is kind to this woman.¹

Friends, we - as human beings - have a frustrating tendency to draw boundaries around those that we deem “worthy” or “normal” or “appropriate” or, dare I say, “American.” Jesus, time and time again, challenges our presuppositions of “worthiness.” Often, the people we consider “worthy” conveniently look and act a lot like us! It is not until we affirm that *none of us* is “worthy” of God’s grace by our own merit that we can fully embrace the difficult but holy task of welcoming others to the eternal well of God’s mercy, that living water that we cannot produce for ourselves but instead are given gracefully by the “Fount of Every Blessing.”

We are called by today’s passage to realize that though we might see someone else as a “nobody,” that “nobody” *is somebody* in Jesus’ eyes. And, therefore, they should be somebody in *our* eyes as well.² Let us all remember, that wherever we see someone, or a group of people, being treated as a “nobody,” what is being done is directly antithetical to the very core of who we are as Christians. And you and I as members of the church, as members of this community, and as members of this country, have too often been complicit in such by either doing or saying something hurtful or - as is too often the case - *not* doing or *not* saying something to welcome the stranger and the marginalized.

And, friends, at the end of the day, all of us - each and every last one of us - has done something that would make us feel like we need to go to the well at noon to avoid everyone else. Let us rejoice in the fact that the savior we follow on this Lenten journey is a savior who welcomes us in all our brokenness, in all our “unworthiness,” to drink from the spring of eternal life. Let us invite people to “come and see” the savior that seeks us in the moments when all we want to do is run and hide. Instead, let us open our hearts to the God whose arms are already open to embrace us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

¹Deborah J. Kapp, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*.

² Again, with much thanks to Deborah J. Kapp for this imagery.