FMC March 12, 2023

Barbara Ewy

John 4:5-42

To Be Truly Known

The story of the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is rich in depth, and there are many ways to approach the story. In our children’s Sunday school lesson last week, the story was introduced with a question to us. We were asked to talk about a time when we gave water to someone or shared a fun water experience with someone. My mind went back to a time when I was a seminary student at AMBS many years ago. I was living in a studio apartment on campus, part of a row of four studios parallel to a row of larger apartments for families. In between the two was a long stretch of grass. I don’t remember a lot of detail. I know it was not early morning or evening, and I think it may have been a Saturday, because I was not in class. But a stranger came walking down that green space between the apartments. He saw me and stopped. He asked for a drink of water.

I don’t remember much about the stranger. What I do remember is the way I felt; I felt vulnerable. I was a young (in my twenties) single female and there didn’t seem to be anyone else around, although I knew the apartments were all occupied. But I also remembered Jesus’ words, “If someone is thirsty, give them a drink.” So I gave the man a glass of water. I think he thanked me, but I don’t really remember. After drinking the water he went on his way.

I wonder if the Samaritan woman in our text today also felt vulnerable when she saw Jesus sitting beside the well. Or perhaps vulnerability was a way of life for her. We only know part of her story. We know that she came to the well at noon, a time of day when she would be unlikely to meet anyone. It was more usual for women to come early in the day to fetch water for the days’ necessities. We know that she had been married five times, and was now living with a man who was not her husband. Because of this past we often think of her as a prostitute, but she was not that. We don’t know why she had had five husbands, but she had been married to them. Perhaps she was married young, widowed, subjected to Levirate marriage, where brothers of the dead husband would take her as a wife, and so was passed down through the family until no brothers were left. Perhaps she was divorced. In that case we need to recognize that women were not allowed the privilege of divorce. Only the husband could divorce a wife. Nor do we know anything about the man she now lived with. Perhaps it was a common law marriage, most likely living with the man was her only way to survive. Nonetheless a woman with her past would have been looked down upon, thought unworthy, perhaps shunned.

We don’t know if she felt vulnerable when she saw a man sitting beside the well. Perhaps she had met the disciples as they went into town to buy food. We know that she was surprised when Jesus spoke to her. “Give me a drink,” he said. “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” she responded. The request was wrong in so many ways. Not only did Jewish men not speak to women in public, unless it were a wife, there was great enmity between Jews and Samaritans. To share a utensil, such as a bucket to drink from, was unheard of. It would leave the Jew ritually unclean. She was rightly surprised by Jesus’ request. What follows is the longest conversation recorded in the New Testament between Jesus and another individual. This encounter is significant.

We might contrast it with Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus. Nicodemus was male, a respected Pharisee with high status. The woman is of low status; we don’t even know her name. Nicodemus was a Jewish “insider”; the woman was a Samarian “outsider.” Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night; the woman meets Jesus in the light of noonday. Nicodemus, despite all his learning, struggles to understand Jesus. The woman, as she talks with Jesus, gains new and greater understanding. Nicodemus at best becomes a secret disciple; the woman tells her whole town about Jesus, inviting them to “come and see” for themselves.

The dialogue between Jesus and the woman moves from Jesus’ request for water to Jesus’ offer of living water. “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.” Living water comes from a Greek phrase that can mean running water, water from a spring rather than water sitting in a vessel. It also has a metaphorical meaning, water that gives life. The conversation moves back and forth between the literal meaning and the metaphorical.

The woman understands. She gets it. She speaks for her people, the Samaritans. “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?” Jews and Samaritans shared a common ancestor in Jacob. The woman is asking Jesus a question with more than literal implications. If Jesus is greater than Jacob, he must be a prophet, and an important one at that.

Jesus replies, “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 responds, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

At that point Jesus tells the woman to go, call her husband, and come back. The woman admits, “I have no husband.” And Jesus says, “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 recognizes Jesus as a prophet. Her next statement goes to the root of the differences between Jews and Samaritans. The region of Samaria had been part of the Northern Kingdom of Israel after Solomon’s reign when the kingdom split in two. Israel had been captured by the Assyrians. Some of the people had been carried off to Assyria and foreigners were moved in by Assyria. Eventually the remaining Jews and the foreigners intermarried. The result was a syncretism of combined traditions and religious beliefs. The Samaritans no longer worshiped at Jerusalem but on the mountain. When the Jews returned from exile they avoided those who had been left behind. From their perspective, Samaritans practiced idolatry. Jews and Samaritans became enemies, disagreeing about where to worship and how to worship. The woman’s question is deeply theological. It goes to the heart of worship, to the heart of the community’s relationship to God. “Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain,” she declared, “but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”

Jesus’ reply bridges that gap between Jew and Samaritan, and goes far beyond it. “the hour is coming and is now here, when the true worshipers 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.” To set aside set preconceptions about location and form of worship opens doors for enemies to eat together, live together, worship together. It is God’s reconciling work.

The woman recognizes that Jesus is not an ordinary prophet. “I know that Messiah is coming,” she declares, “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus responds, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

The woman leaves her water jar, runs to town and tells everyone she meets, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” Because of her testimony the townspeople leave the town and come out to see for themselves. God’s reconciling spirit is at work, for they invite Jesus to stay. He remains with them two days, (something that is never done!), and many believe. They tell 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.”

When I reflect on this story I am struck by the interplay between Jesus and the woman. Jesus is tired and addresses the woman from a position of need, not power or privilege. Jesus is thirsty for physical water. He perceives that the woman is thirsty for living water. There is respect in their dialogue. The woman speaks her truth to Jesus. Jesus teaches her God’s truth, as he would a disciple. (Also something that just wasn’t done; women were not taught as the men were) In fact, she responds as a disciple. Her words echo those of Philip in John chapter 1, who met Jesus and went to his friend Nathaniel, telling him “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth. Come and see.” The woman tells the people of her city to “come and see.” She is, in fact, Jesus’ disciple to the Samaritans. We did not read verses 31 to 38 in chapter 4. These verses are Jesus’ metaphor of the harvest which requires reapers. The woman is actually doing the work of reaping the harvest that God has prepared among the Samaritans in her city. Her actions become an example to Jesus’ Jewish disciples.

So who is truly known in this story? When I began thinking about it, the phrase that stuck with me was the woman’s words, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” There is something life-giving about being known so thoroughly and still respected and loved. Jesus knew her past, her struggles, her vulnerabilities. He knew the worst parts of her life. He also knew the best. He saw her thirst for God, her spiritual understanding, her gift for reaching out and telling others. We don’t know what happened to the woman or the Samaritans in that city after Jesus left, but I imagine that she was never so alone again, never so shunned, never so talked about but that she had been restored as a respected member of her community. She did indeed receive living water from Jesus, and it changed her life and the lives of those around her.

But she is not the only person in this story who was truly known. The stranger who sat beside the well and asked for water also became truly known in this story. Jesus’ identity that aligns him with the Father and God’s reconciling Spirit is also revealed. “I am he, the one who is speaking to you,” Jesus declares. Way back in the Old Testament in the days of Moses, God told Moses, “I am the God of your Father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” When the Israelites ask who has sent you, tell them “I am who I am. I am has sent me to you.” (Exodus chapter 3)

God’s Spirit calls forth truth. God’s Spirit brings reconciliation. God’s Spirit is life giving, like living water. We have spent years in literal drought. We know that water is life; we cannot live with out it. We cannot grow crops without it; Our bodies will perish with out it. We know the benefits of rain that breaks drought. We also know the power and wildness of rushing water. We have watched as the Kings River took in runoff from rain and snowmelt. We have seen it reach flood stage, breaking its banks and spreading out over the lands at the river bottom. At flood stage the river doesn’t recognize boundaries but goes where it wishes.

God’s Spirit is like that. It leads us across boundaries into unknown, sometimes enemy territory, as it led Jesus into Samaria. Outsiders become insiders. God’s Spirit changes lives, transforming enemies into friends, healing hurts and finding strength in weakness. It enables us to set aside our need to be first or best or wealthiest or most respected, so that we can enter into the needs of our neighbor with compassion, love and service. God knows us as we truly are, the good and bad, the hurts and failures, the successes, dreams and gifts. God’s Spirit calls forth the persons that each of us is meant to be, God’s Spirit gives us life.

The other night as I lay in bed thinking about the floods in the valley, the Samaritan woman, and living water, two choruses I learned as a child kept running through my head. “Deep and wide, deep and wide, there’s a river flowing deep and wide,” and “running over, running over, my cup is full and running over. Since the Lord saved me, I’m as happy as can be, my cup is full and running over.” May God’s Spirit be with you, deep and wide, filling your cup and running over, giving you life abundant.

Please turn in your blue worship hymnals to number 495 O let all who thirst.