

Third Sunday in Lent, Year A, 032314
All Saints Episcopal Church

"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!"

In the name of God, who creates us, blesses us and loves us. Amen.

Every story worth telling begins with something out of place, with some kind of conflict, or with some sort of obstacles to overcome. In last week's Gospel story, Nicodemus comes to see Jesus in the middle of the night. That is certainly out of place. Nicodemus is a part of the establishment, a Pharisee, an insider. Why would he need to come to talk to Jesus under cover of darkness?

Today's story follows the maxim as well. Jesus is in Samaria, which is out of his usual territory. He is out of place. The Samaritan woman that he meets is alone at the well in the middle of the day. That's not the usual time of day to go to the well. You go early in the morning, when it is still cool. Men and women in that culture go their separate ways; they don't interact with each other outside the home. And women certainly don't leave their houses to go out without a chaperone.

The Samaritan woman is unknown to Jesus. We do not know her name. There has been struggle and pain in her life. We learn that as their conversation unfolds - a conversation between a Jew and a Samaritan, which is also out of place. She is shunned from the community because she has been married five times (more about that in a minute). She lives in the margins. She is thirsty for something else besides plain old well water.

Now, I don't know about you, but I grew up hearing this story and getting the impression that this woman is not a 'good' person. Lots of other people have this same impression, too. And I will bet that if you were to go to almost any other church today and the sermon was about this particular lesson of scripture, you would most likely hear the preacher say something to the effect that this woman has a shady past, is a prostitute, or worse. There is no basis for that idea, other than the sentence that says, "You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband." The woman could very easily have been widowed or divorced. Being married five times is a lot, but it is not impossible. And she could be living now with a male relative on whom she is dependent.

Back in the day, as you know, women were valued for their child-bearing capabilities; it is very likely in this situation that the woman at the well is 'barren' - that she cannot conceive, and therefore has been dumped by one husband after another when it becomes evident that she will not be able to produce a male heir. Her life is one disappointment after another.

This would be the reason why she does not come to the well when the other women are there. A barren woman is bad luck - her curse of barrenness might rub off on them somehow - so they shun her. It's not personal, what they are doing. They are just playing it safe, they say. Notice that in this story, Jesus doesn't say anything about sin or forgiveness. This is not a story about a woman who leads an immoral life.

So when Jesus describes the woman's past to her, she says, "I see that you are a prophet." It's a confession of faith. "Seeing" in John is all-important. To see is often connected with belief. She believes in him because she knows that he has seen her. She is a real person for him - she has worth and significance. She is definitely not used to this kind of treatment!

So the woman asks questions about the living water that Jesus is talking about. She lets him know about her spiritual thirst; not only does she long for literal water, she is excited to learn about the 'living water' that Jesus offers her. He talks about the water of eternal life, of hope and inspiration and encouragement and promise. Imagine hearing words of hope and inspiration when you are so intimately acquainted with the reality of bitter disappointment! And, unlike Abraham, whose promise from God is based on the existence of many descendants, Jesus invites her to not be defined by her circumstances, and he offers her an identity that lifts her above her tragedy.

She accepts his offer and becomes the first character in John's gospel who looks for others to tell them about Jesus. She is so excited, in fact, about what she is hearing from Jesus that, in her rush to return to town to let everyone else know what she has found out, she leaves her water jar at the well! She goes back to the village and tells the people, "He told me everything I've ever done!" But it's not because he has recited to her a timeline of her marriages. Rather, he has spoken compassionate and healing words to her about her journey through all that

disappointment and beyond, in order to come to a new place: the font of living water.

The story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well reminds us that the kingdom he brings to the world is a realm of inclusion not exclusion, dignity not deprecation, empowerment not exploitation, and affirmation rather than marginalization. His completely normal and understandable request for a drink of water begins a rich conversation with a marginalized woman that teaches us that Jesus does not want any human being to shrivel up and die from a parched soul; instead he longs to quench the deepest needs and desires of each one of us with the "living water" of his Spirit. And isn't this all any of us really need for our own healing - a space where we can allow ourselves to acknowledge who we are, and in that moment be graced by the one who does not turn away from our shame and failure, but who floods our lives with his living water? This is a story of the transforming power of love and the capacity to receive and live into a new identity.

You know, some Christian traditions honor this Samaritan woman - nameless in John's text - calling her the "first evangelist" because of her eagerness to share the message of Jesus and his "living water." In the Eastern Orthodox church tradition, she has a name; in Greek she is called "Saint Photina," as in "*photograph*" and "*photosynthesis*". This name gives her an identity. She is a "bringer of light." She joyfully carries the "living water" of the good news of eternal life in Jesus Christ - the "Light of the World." As we embrace our identities, given by our Creator, may we model ourselves on her grace-filled example, bringing light and living water to all those we meet.