

Our Friend, Jesus
John 4:5-42
Colebrook Congregational Church
March 19, 2017 / Third Sunday of Lent

[There were edits for flow & divergence in the delivery of this sermon]

To fully understand today's selection with the Samaritan Woman at the Well, as well as some other stories in the New Testament, one must understand the situation between the Jews and the Samaritans. Even John, usually aloof, recognized that his non-Jewish audience needed to get this Jewish context to understand why it's important, so he included references to their conflict in the conversation between Jesus and the Woman at the Well, where He revealed Himself, His future, and a bit about His personality.

So, who are these Samaritans? After the Israelites were freed from Egypt and wandered in the desert and settled in the Promised Land, they were a confederation of 12 tribes. They eventually asked God for a king to unify under, and Saul was chosen to be king of this Unified Monarchy. Then there was King David, the one that slew Goliath, wrote the Psalms, and is an ancestor of Jesus; then there was wise King Solomon who wrote Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs; and also finally built the First Temple, located in Jerusalem.

After Solomon, there was a civil war and the unified monarchy was split into the Northern Kingdom of Israel or Samaria; and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. With the political split starting the groundwork of the religious split, as Judah possessed Jerusalem and the Temple, claiming it as the one true Home for YHWH, and there can only be one Temple. Meanwhile, Samaria did not want their people dependent on Judah for worship, so they built two alternate temples in the north, which offended the Judahites. And to the Samaritans, this is when the Judahites abandoned the true worship of YHWH. They also believe that their version of the Bible, which only has the first five books, the Pentateuch, is the true version, and that the Judahites changed it to fit their side of this situation.

Later on, the Northern Kingdom of Israel or Samaria is conquered by Assyria. Now, when Assyria conquers a country, it wants to prevent rebellions, so it had a policy of removing a portion of the populace, dispersing them throughout the empire, and replacing that void by forcing people from all over their empire to move into the conquered region. This mixed everybody up so they could not even communicate or organize. To the Judahites in the South, this was the point where the Samaritans started to stop being Jewish...because Samaria is now full of foreigners and therefore enemies.

Now on the Samaritan side, two of the tribes claimed that they survived the Assyrian conquest. They then refused to move south to join with the Judahites, continuing to occupy Samaria. This was their constant argument between the two groups, whether or not they were cousins or foreigners, and it wasn't settled until 2004 when genetic ancestry testing of the present-day Samaritans show that they have common ancestry with all other Jews, with a mix of lineages from the areas of the Assyrian Empire, proving something between their two claims, that the two tribes and their Levite priests did survive, but they also intermarried with the transplanted peoples.

Now when the Kingdom of Judah was conquered by the Babylonians, the population was relocated to Babylon, but they were not dispersed. They were allowed to return and to rebuild their Temple, but they found that the Samaritans had moved south into their area and then they rejected their offer to help them rebuild things, considering the Samaritans to be pagans at this point. The Samaritans were offended and built their own temple to YHWH in the north again, out of spite, which angered the Judahites again.

Then Alexander the Great comes through and one of his successors decreed that everyone should be like the Greeks and worship their pantheon or face execution. The Judeans revolted while the Samaritans surrendered their Temple and unwillingly re-dedicated it to Zeus. Then Jerusalem was sacked and the Temple desecrated. The Judeans were so upset about this betrayal, that they later sent an army north that destroyed the Samaritans' Temple.

This final episode dealing with the Greeks is seen as the final breach between the two peoples, and is seen as the reason for v. 9, where the Woman says that “Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.”

By the time of Jesus, the religious leaders of both peoples taught that it is taboo to have anything to do with each other, not to enter each others territory, nor even speak to one another.

While John usually doesn't care much for Judaism, in this case, he does care about this context, this intense hatred and alienation between Judea and Samaria, because it does add to the Message, by making what Jesus does more powerful and significant.

With today's selection, Jesus is traveling from Judea to Galilee. Now, the direct route is through Samaria, but the hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans is so great, this was not a safe route for the Disciples to take, and Luke's Gospel even relates how inhospitable they were treated there. The safer way to go is to cross the River Jordan to Perea and then head north; but Jesus doesn't do that. He goes straight into Samaria.

They climb up into the mountains of Samaria and Jesus stops at the famous Jacob's Well at about noon. This Well was hewn out solid rock thousands of years ago, seven and a half feet in diameter and 135 feet deep; and is located at a junction of roads. Jesus is waiting there while the Disciples are out getting supplies.

John does not seem to care why the woman was fetching water in the midday sun instead of the customary cooler morning or evening; or of the sacred nature of the Well, because there are many rivers in that area, so the Well solely as a source of drinking water didn't make much sense.

John then references the animosity between their peoples, before launching into his familiar pattern where Jesus says something that can have both literal and spiritual meanings and is misunderstood, which is expressed in a question, to which Jesus repeats before explaining and applying the meaning.

Here, it is the living water that is misunderstood as meaning the well spring of water, and the woman is also assuming a slight against Jacob. Jesus explains that He did not mean the water that meets our physical needs, but the water from Him that renews itself and meets our spiritual needs. But the woman still doesn't get the hidden meaning, assuming He is speaking of an actual well that gives everlasting life.

Then Jesus switches to show His supernatural knowledge, demonstrating His divine nature, proving who He is, by showing that He knows her life story. By doing this, He establishes for her that he is a true prophet.

The Woman then references the difficulties between the Samaritans and the Jews, to which Jesus uses to speak about true worship, lifting it above the level of tribal claims. That it doesn't matter if God is worshiped at Mount Zion in Jerusalem or at Mount Gerizim in Samaria. She acknowledges that the Messiah will finally settle this question.

The Disciples return and are shocked that He is speaking to not just a woman, but to a Samaritan one. The woman takes that opportunity to drop her jug, which would have slowed her down anyway, and go run and tell people that the Messiah may have arrived so others should come see.

Meanwhile, He speaks with the Disciples. They offer Him food, and He responds with a spiritual message. He speaks of how He is sowing the seeds of Good News, that they will reap later. A [prediction] of the church and its mission.

Finally, the woman returns with the townsfolk, and they see and hear for themselves how Jesus is the Messiah and believe.

There is a lot going on here. There are revelations about Jesus and about the future, in His display of omniscience, and in His dialogues about living water and reaping & sowing. There is a message of inclusion, by going to the land of those most hated, and preaching the Good News to them. And there are the conflicts that will no longer matter.

And there is how Jesus treated the Samaritan Woman, which stood out to me, because He knew what she had done in her life and how she was living it, but He did not judge her. He ignored the baggage of cultural history and gender norms. He gained her as a Follower by being generous, with His offer of living water, not by pushing her away because she was a sinner and an evil Samaritan.

To me, Jesus is being like that friend who accepts and loves you even though they know all the foolish stuff you've done. Despite the bad, they always see the good and they are there for you.

I have these two friends. One is young and a bit wild and the other is a bit older than her and much calmer. I have seen how the younger one can lose control and lash out at people and the older one calmly lets her wear herself out, and then makes sure she fixes what she broke. When she is starting to lose control in public, I've seen him embrace her and keep her calm. No matter what she does, no matter how she lives her life, no matter how poor a decision she makes, he is always on her side, not judging her, nor condoning her, but would challenge her to do and be better. He knew that if he scolded her and judged her, it would not convince her to make better decisions. He was a true friend to her, and she has a tattoo on her clavicle for all to see that includes everything important in her life, and in the center is a symbol that represents him.

We cannot just see Jesus as the Word, as the Messiah, as our Savior. All the great and grand concepts of Christ. They can seem impersonal on the individual level, it does not take in to account the personal. While He is all those things and more, we must never forget that Jesus is also our friend.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

Welcoming Jesus, we come to You at the well, from all walks & seasons of life, from all circumstances, and in every mood. Some of us are eager, curious; some of us are defensive and worried; some of us are tired or lonely. But most of all, we are thankful You're with us. Please be gracious and kind as we pour out of ourselves for You to receive. Pour out life for us yet again and renew us by your mercy. Amen

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

[PAUSE]

O God who welcomes all in love, to You we pray for the good of Your church, our community, and the concerns of those in need. We lift up our hearts in faith to You, the one who hears all prayers and holds close all of Creation.

We give you thanks for all the blessings and gifts you have given us, for those you have led into our lives and for moving us into the lives of others. And we thank you for using us as instruments of your divine love for us all.

Almighty God, You love us, but we have not always loved You; You call, but we may not have listened. We may have walked away from neighbors in need, we may have been wrapped up in our own concerns. We may have gone along with evil, pride, quarrelling, and divisiveness. Help us to face up to ourselves, so that, as You move toward us in mercy, we may repent, turn to You, and receive mercy;

We pray for everyone who needs Your help. For those who are unwell or wounded in mind, body, or spirit. We pray for the many who do not have enough: enough food to eat, or shelter to keep warm; enough employment, or money to pay their bills; enough medicine or medical care.

We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, to live up to the standard Jesus set for us. We pray for the strength to Follow the Path of Jesus. We pray for calmness and serenity in a chaotic world. We pray that we recognize your messengers and those You send to help us and redirect us for who they are, and that we show the wisdom to heed them.

We especially pray for:
April Stone

Gracious God, we offer these prayers and all those of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 95

95:1 O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

95:2 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

95:3 For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

95:4 In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also.

95:5 The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

95:6 O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

95:7 For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice!

95:8 Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,

95:9 when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

95:10 For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways."

95:11 Therefore in my anger I swore, "They shall not enter my rest."

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 worshiped 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 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." 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 labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

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 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."