

Faith Mennonite Church
February 24, 2008 ~ Lent 3

The Woman at the Well: Take 2

Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42

In the denominational worship resources that we received for this Lenten season, Lent is described as “a journey from rebellion to obedience, from need to satisfaction, from blindness to sight, from death to life, from power to grace.” When we think of this journey, and of the need to confess sin, we often think in individualistic terms: we sometimes individually make choices that sink us into the depths, alienating us from God. This is all true.

However, the collective actions of communities sometimes creates an atmosphere that leaves some of its members, and outsiders, feeling helpless and excluded, plunged in depths that they did not create by their personal actions and which they feel powerless to overcome. Within the religious history of Judaism and Christianity, there have been struggles related to ethnicity and race—some peoples claiming privilege over others. There have been struggles related to gender—who is fit to lead, preach, and teach. And today churches struggle over sexual identity and whether to welcome and include gay and lesbian people of faith.

Our gospel text this morning offers an excellent example of ways that good news has sometimes been turned on its head and spun as bad news for a particular group of people—in this case women.

Take 1: Good news as bad news. When I was a growing up and heard the story of the woman at the well several things were usually emphasized about the woman:

- 1) She came to the well at noon, in the heat of the day, because she was a “bad” woman, ostracized by her community, and thus unable to come when other women would carry water in the coolness of the morning.
- 2) Her chattiness was all a foil to distract Jesus from talking about the truth of her sexually immoral life
- 3) When Jesus saw through her, and let her know that he knew of her 5-husband track record, she realized his greatness and ran off to tell her village
- 4) But, the fact that she evangelized her village was often minimized by the fact that “many more believed because of Jesus’ testimony” after he stayed in the village for 2 days. So she is remembered primarily as the bad women saved by Jesus.

What’s wrong with this interpretation and why is it bad news? While we rejoice when anyone finds a new story that gives meaning to their life, the bad news is that the way this story has been interpreted reinforces a negative stereotype about women. That stereotype is based in a number of biblical passages, for instance the book of Proverbs, written to a “young man” who is constantly admonished to avoid “bad, loose women.” For centuries, millennia, religious institutions have often reinforced this image by casting women as either a prostitute or a virgin. They have defined women primarily by their sexuality and placed restrictions on how they must

act and what roles they can exercise in the church, rather than accepting them as co-creators with men in creation and God's kingdom.

Some women, unfortunately, have despaired that things will ever change, and have simply walked away from Christianity and the church. Others have plunged deeper into the depths, re-reading and studying scripture and tradition, to find the good news that they believe must be present if God is a God of love. One of these women in our denomination is Janet Brenneman, who was recently ordained in the Lancaster Conference, even though that conference still officially prohibits the ordination of women. Janet served as a missionary in Central America for over 20 years and along the way received her Doctor of Ministry degree. The Honduran Mennonite Church first licensed her for ministry, when the Lancaster conference would not do so and one of the elders of Honduran Mennonite Church came to participate in our ordination service. Another such woman is Sandra Schneiders, a NT scholar who has done extensive study of the Gospel of John. In her book, *Written that you may believe*, she provides an interpretation of the Woman at the Well that allows us an opportunity to Take 2.

Take 2: Perhaps this is not a story about a bad woman who finds Jesus, but rather a highly symbolic story about a spiritually curious and theologically savvy woman who represents the Samaritan people and their inclusion in the new community of faith after Jesus' resurrection. The "entire dialogue between Jesus and the woman," according to Schneiders, "is the 'wooing' of Samaria to full covenant fidelity in the new Israel by Jesus, the new Bridegroom" (141).

Let's review the story again. The story unfolds at mid-day in broad day-light. This contrasts with the scripture we read last week of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night. The evangelist contrasts light and darkness throughout the gospel of John. Light signifies illumination and understanding. Darkness signifies doubt and confusion. Unlike Nicodemus, who came to Jesus in the cover of dark, asked a question and then receded into the shadows as Jesus expounded on new birth, the Samaritan woman, who arrives in the bright noon-day light, engages in the single longest conversation that anyone has with Jesus in this gospel.

The story takes place at a well. What do we know about well encounters in the Old Testament? They were places of matchmaking! Recall Abraham's servant who finds Isaac's future wife, Rebecca, at a well, and Jacob meeting Rachel at a well in Haran, and Moses, marrying Zipporah after rescuing her and her sisters at a well in Midian. This story of the woman at the well is embedded in a section of the gospel that begins with Jesus' miracle at the *wedding* of Cana, followed by a conversation among John the Baptist and his disciples in which John proclaims Jesus as the *bridegroom* and he himself as the friend of the bridegroom. The story of the woman at the well is part of the writer's interest in establishing Jesus as the Bridegroom of the bride, the new Israel. Jesus, the bridegroom at the well, is calling the Samaritan people into a full covenant relationship, to be his bride.

Watch how this unfolds. Jesus begins by asking the woman for water. The woman is surprised that Jesus would make such a request of her on two accounts—her religious ethnicity and her gender. The questions that the woman asks are not to deflect Jesus from getting to her personal life, but rather questions about his religious identity. The Samaritans emphasized an

allegiance to the Mosaic-patriarchal tradition, while the Jews emphasized the Davidic-monarchical tradition. When Jesus offers this woman water that is on par or supersedes the water from this patriarchal well of Jacob, he places himself in the patriarchal tradition and affirms her tradition.

Next comes the exchange about the five husbands and the place and nature of worship, which we should read as a continuous conversation. If the light and the well are symbolic, what might this reference to five husbands signify? Given the social and religious culture of first century Palestine and Samaria, it's hard to imagine a woman having literally been in five marriages that she would have either initiated or dissolved. But if we turn to 2 Kings 17:13-34, we find that when the people of Samaria returned from exile in Assyria, they returned to land that had been settled with people from five nations (Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim) each with their own religion. The Samaritans began to practice religious adultery, so to speak, and verse 33 says "So they worshiped the Lord but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away." So, indeed, this woman, representative of all of Samaria, recognized the truth that she/Samaria had had five husbands (the foreign gods they have worshiped) and the one she/they had now—Yahweh—was not her own because Samaria wasn't entirely faithful to Yahweh. It is not surprising then that the woman responds emphatically that Jesus is a prophet, for in the prophetic tradition the charge that you "have no husband" is a classic denunciation of false worship (recall Hosea).

But still she feels a need to confirm his prophetic authority. For the Samaritans, worship on Mount Gerazim tied them to the patriarchal authority, while the Jews worshiped in Jerusalem, the seat of David and monarchical authority. But Jesus replies that when Messiah comes there would be no sacred worship places, for those who worship will worship in spirit and truth. This concurred with Samaritan theology, which held that the messianic era would be characterized by worship in spirit because God is a spirit. When the woman expresses her expectation that Messiah will come and proclaim all things, Jesus unambiguously reveals himself to her as Messiah and as the God of the Mosaic revelation by saying "I am."

The woman is overcome with excitement, leaves her jar just as the disciples left their nets, and runs to tell her village and bring them to Jesus. They trust her word and invite Jesus to *dwell* or *abide* with them—a term used in the 4th gospel to mean union with Jesus. The story is complete: the Samaritans, once despised by the Jews (and vice versa) are now wedded to Jesus and part of his bride, the new community. And that conversion story—this story of mission—is told with a woman at the center as one who ably navigated this cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue and one who brought her people to full communion with Christ.

This story is likely not about the sexual sin of one woman, but the sin of infidelity of an entire people. It calls us to reflect on our lives, individually and as a congregation, and to ask whether we have more than one "husband or partner." Are we allowing Christ to dwell in us fully, or are there parts of ourselves and our lives that we withhold from God in order to follow the gods of the culture that we live in? Do we, like the Israelites in the desert, blame God for the

emptiness we feel, or will we open ourselves to accept Jesus' offer of living water that will forever satisfy us.

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Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written that you may believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*. New York: Herder & Herder, Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999, 2003