

## **Sunday, March 15, 2020 - Lent 3 - Yr. A**

*(Ex 17:1-7; Jn 4:5-42)*

This is a very curious story from John's gospel. It is a story with as many twists and turns as the story of Nicodemus last week. Indeed, John's gospel is full of these long stories of Jesus engaging a person (or they engage him). A long conversation ensues – that often causes the other person to feel more confused. Yet it is no accident that these stories are told during Lent. In spite of the confusing conversation, the interaction gives us some understanding about this man named Jesus – even as Jesus heals the one in conversation with him.

When we first read this story of the “woman at the well” (also known as the Woman of Samaria) we too are left wondering and scratching our heads. It is not clear to us – what Jesus is referring to when he says he has “living water.” Hmmm! It is also not clear to us why Jesus asks the woman to go and get her husband. What has **that** to do with the conversation? Then there's the part about having 5 husbands - and the current one is not even her husband! Again, this woman has a story to tell – too bad we do not hear more of her story!

We also ask ourselves: why is the woman coming by herself to draw water – and why at midday? We know that in ancient times women never did this task alone but always in the company of other women (for safety reasons). And always at dawn – not in the heat of the day! I suspect there is more to her story than we will ever know.

Finally, why did it take all 12 disciples to buy food – is it not strange that no one stayed back with Jesus? I know – we could all argue that he wanted to be alone – but that is probably not safe even for him! This is different than going off alone to pray – with the disciples close by. Why did Jesus just sit by the edge of the well as if to wait for someone to come to give him water? That is bizarre in itself. He knows that water is drawn at dawn – so was it just a coincidence that this woman came then? Doubtful! As always we can only guess at Jesus' motives. Maybe he knew who was about to come. Maybe he was there – specifically to offer some healing.

Like most of the stories from John's gospel – this one is quite interesting – with many, many twists. But John is not merely telling us a story of coincidences or

of twists and turns. John is telling a story with meaning – and the meaning lies in the fact that Jesus – through his probing and his questions – is able to make a person whole again. This is exactly what Jesus does – he questions the woman and in so doing, restores her to health and wholeness.

When the woman approaches the well – Jesus probably thought: “this is interesting!” The Samaritan woman probably felt quite apprehensive – seeing a man sitting there. She, in turn, probably thought, “what now! – Oh no – a man – and a Jew! What do I do now! Well, I best get on with the task – my family needs this water. It’s not like I haven’t dealt with men before!”

We need to remember that this would have been a dangerous situation for a woman – since a woman was never alone with a man other than her husband, son, father, uncle, or brother. I have the feeling, though, that this woman was not going to stand on ceremony! She most likely had nothing to lose! Though most of us do not know what HER life was like – many of us in this room – at one time or another – have had to take a deep breath, say a prayer, and continue on in spite of a looming situation. Fear is - after all, quite universal. Needing to get water for your family, or your children – is also universal. Interestingly, Jesus begins the conversation by saying: “give me a drink.” At this moment the woman is quite shocked that a man is speaking to her. She says: “are you talking to me – a Samaritan and a woman?”

The conversation quickly moves to a much deeper level. Jesus offers the woman “living water” which will allow her to never be thirsty again! At first she does not understand this. Nor do we! She is looking for physical water – for his bucket! Jesus offers spiritual water – and spiritual food. We know (today) that this “living water” is a reference to himself. What we learn (and she does too) is that **if** this woman is honest with Jesus – then she will be made whole again through this “living water” or through the new life that he offers. At first, the woman (like Nicodemus last week) is confused. But like Nicodemus, this woman eventually begins to grasp the power of this man and the gift of his healing. She begins to open herself up to him. In time, her pain is laid before Jesus.

Jesus knows that because of her traveling alone – at midday – she is either a sinner or a victim. He knows that if this woman is not with the other women – and if no man is accompanying her to the well – then she is probably shunned by

her community and not cared for by her husband. Jesus is not naive. He frequently uses his skills of discernment. He knows that his society makes very restrictive laws against all kinds of things and all kinds of people! Usually the poor, the widows, the sick, the children, the women – paid the price for these restrictive laws. The vulnerable ones were not well cared for. That’s why God said in the Hebrew Scriptures – time and again: “you shall care for the poor, and the widows among you” and “you shall care for the alien among you.” God knows – Jesus knows – that the weak often pay the highest price. We know this is true still today.

Knowing that it was not right that this woman came out at midday alone, Jesus asks the obvious question: “Where is your husband?” It took courage for the woman to say: “I have no husband.” She probably said it with her head bent down in shame. Jesus continues to heal her as he questions. They talk about worship of God and the coming of the Messiah. Jesus engages the woman in conversation – and she engages him. If nothing else she is well educated – or she would not have been able to “hold her own” in conversation with this man. It is in the act of conversing with her and treating her as a whole, and worthy human being – that Jesus heals her. We all know that sometimes that is all it takes – to tell your story – have someone care, and **not** judge you. We know from scripture that she is healed, because she goes back to her town and she tells the people about Jesus. For an ostracized woman this was not usually possible. Furthermore, scripture says that the town believed her – about Jesus! The “living water” that Jesus offers – heals her of her isolation, her pain.

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We are not really all that different from this woman are we? I suspect most of us feel some pain or grief in our life somewhere. If not - then you are among the lucky few. But many of us have feelings of pain, grief, loneliness, isolation. Suffering is as varied as we are. Some of us never felt loved as a child. Some of us were abandoned by our mother. For some of us – our father was distant or abusive. Perhaps we feel less than adequate today, or we feel judged, or unloved, or uncertain. At times the pain is a burden. At other times we refuse to let these pains burden us. Even if we manage to bury most of these pains, once in a while something comes along to stir up old feelings.

That's what this story is about. Jesus questions and heals the woman, making her whole again. And Jesus is able to do this for us as well. Jesus – the healer! He asks questions, gathers information – then slowly and methodically, he lets us know that we are free of all that burdens us. We are free of all that holds us captive and makes us a slave to the past. We are made whole again.

First though, we have to be willing to approach Jesus. We have to let him ask the difficult questions. He wants to know why we are a certain way (just as he wanted to know why this woman was alone at the well at midday). Just as he asks though – we need to have the courage to answer, engage and not turn away, not brush it off as nothing. Once we open ourselves to Jesus, the answers to his questions (hopefully) come pouring out. And what follows is the acceptance of who we are and what we are – both to ourselves and to Jesus! It doesn't matter to Jesus if we have had 5 husbands – or if we are ostracized – or if we feel unloved – or if we are adopted – or if we are isolated – if we are not understood – or transgendered – or sick – or a complainer – a drug-addict – or... (and the list goes on).

It doesn't matter if we are jealous, or envious, judgmental, over-worked, an alcoholic, a loner. It doesn't matter what our pain is – what our story is – Jesus wants to hear it and wants to heal us of all that would enslave us! First – we must be willing and courageous enough to go to the well alone (at midday) – and engage in conversation with one who is just sitting there – waiting for us to tell our story!

That's the message of the gospel lesson today. If we take our pain to Jesus – if we let him question us (really question us) – then we will find healing and wholeness once again. Sisters and brothers in Christ, that is why we are here during Lent – to receive the "living water" from God that comes thru Jesus Christ. Life is too short to NOT let ourselves be healed by Jesus. Take it to the Lord in prayer - says the hymn. We need to take it to God, to Jesus and let the healing begin. So thanks be to God for this word of hope.

Amen.