

Talking to Strangers
Sunday, March 12, 2023
The Third Sunday in Lent
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Jesus comes into the world speaking to strangers, so that they may receive the gift of salvation.

Ancient artwork portrays the Apostle John as an old man with a long, flowing beard, clutching the pages of his Gospel. I like to imagine John's grandchildren rushing up to him, tugging at his cloak, begging him for a story. "Tell us about Jesus," they say. "Tell us about the time Jesus met the woman at the well." And I imagine John smiling a bit as he sits his arthritic back into a chair. "Oh," he says, reflecting on that time he saw Jesus conversing with this unknown woman, "well, that's a long story."

Indeed, it is. Even by John's longwinded standards, this encounter by the well of Jacob in Sychar is a long tale. It is the longest account of any of Jesus' conversations, and it is full of surprises. John juxtaposes this story against the one we read last week about Nicodemus. The two couldn't be more different: Jesus meets Nicodemus in the night, but encounters the woman in the heat of the day. Nicodemus recedes into the shadows of the gospel, making a few appearances later on. The woman also disappears, but she leaves her encounter with Jesus transformed. Instead of shrinking into the background, we're told she becomes a disciple, rushing back to her hometown, where many become believers because of her testimony.

It's a long story, and we don't have all day, but part of why this story continues to speak to us is its invitation for us to discover that living water Jesus promises.

It happens in the heat of the day, dead noon, in the city of Shechem, at a well said to have belonged to Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah, the grandson of Abraham and Sarah, also known as the Be'er Ya-aquov, the fountain of Jacob. And it starts with Jesus walking into that city on his way back from Jerusalem. He's thirsty, and he sits by the well, hoping for a drink.

The woman arrives not long after. It's an unusual time of day to gather water. Drawing water from the deep well is not easy work, nor is it easy lugging heavy water jugs back

home. Wells do not tend to draw a lot of company in the middle of the day, which might give us a clue about some of the struggles this woman faces.

I read somewhere that today more than 200 million persons, most of them probably women and children, walk about 3.7 miles every day to find drinking water. Round that up to six kilometers, or about 15 laps around a football stadium. If you're a walker you can probably pace that distance in little more than a hour. But it takes longer when its hot, and maybe even longer when you're carrying a jug of water.

We don't think much about clean water, though there are nearly 3,000 places in all fifty states where the ground water is polluted. Water comes easy for us, and we all well remember the impact a tiny little leak in a water pipe had in our lives last Christmas. But water does not come easy for most people in the world, and gathering it has not changed much in the thousands of years since this unnamed woman met Jesus.

It's interesting: John names Nicodemus, a man who will appear again in this story. But the woman remains unnamed, despite all the things she accomplishes in Jesus' name. She's an unnamed woman with a confusing past, trying to gather the water her family needs.

She's a stranger. But then, at least to her, so is Jesus. Sitting in the middle of a city in Samaria is not where we are accustomed to find Jesus, nor any other good practicing Jew of his time. Jews and Samaritans despised each other. They were at odds with each other, tearing at each other's throats. A Jew passing through Samaria was not only surprising, it was unwise.

Yet these two strangers meet..

I have a friend who often stops by Starbucks. That in itself is astonishing because he hates coffee. He does, however, enjoy chai tea, and is even more interested in striking up conversations with strangers. He actually wrote a book called "Meeting Jesus at Starbucks." He enjoys talking with people. And he's good at it. One time at Starbucks, he stood behind a woman he did not know. "Excuse me," he said. "I forget, is it my day or your day to pay for coffee?" He even got his wife on the phone to prove to the woman he was not trying to get a date!

We have taught our children to avoid talking with strangers, and for good reasons. But our reluctance to avoid such conversations also comes with a price, as journalist Malcolm Gladwell notes in his book, ironically titled, "Talking to Strangers." In it he

details some famous conversations, such as British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain meeting Adolf Hitler before World War II. Gladwell shows that while on the one hand, we are all thrown into contact all the time with people whose assumptions, perspectives, and backgrounds are different from our own, but on the other, we are so terribly ineffective at talking with strangers.

We assume facts that are not true. We misjudge context. Take, for example, the woman at the well. As she talks with Jesus, we hear bits and pieces about her marital history. We are quick to form conclusions, but as Francis Taylor Gench reminds us, the truth is we do not know the details of her life, and focusing on those issues causes us to miss the point.

The point is this: this conversation is more about Jesus than it is about her.

Go back and read the start of this story. John tells us that Jesus “had to go through Samaria.” That’s not exactly accurate. While it is true that the fastest route between Jerusalem and Galilee takes you straight through Samaria, it is unlikely that any faithful Jew would have travelled into that country intentionally.

He could have gone another way. But what John means here is that it was *necessary* for Jesus to go to Samaria. The verb carries the connotation of being forced. Jesus had to go to Samaria, not because the traffic was backed up on 270, but because he was the light of God shining in the world.

Jesus *had* to go to the place where he could talk to a stranger, to a person known as “other.”

The woman asks Jesus, “How is it that you, a Jewish man, ask me a Samaritan woman for a drink?” She is aware of the social code that Jesus was breaking, not just in terms of crossing geographic and cultural borders, but in his boldness in talking with a woman. Nothing good will come of this. It’s a line she will not cross.

But Jesus crosses that line. He comes across the boundaries that keep people away from God.

We might say: a Muslim, a homeless person, a person from another race, a person of a different gender or orientation. That is the point: this noontide conversation is not just about quenching a thirst, it is about healing a divide. It is about more than water to drink. It’s about living water that brings reconciliation.

It appears that Jesus does not know what he is doing, but I don't think so. Jesus reminds us that God is about the work of talking to strangers. The Gospel is not about bending someone toward our way of seeing the world. Rather, the gospel is about God bending near the world.

That's why this story matters. It is both a *window* that offers a glimpse of what God is doing in the world and a *mirror* where we are challenged to see God at work in us.

New Testament scholar Jaime Clark Soles tells the story of a time when she was called to be the last-minute replacement minister at a wedding. A friend had become ill and called to see if Dr. Soles might step in. In the notes she had been given by her friend, Dr. Soles noted that a friend of the bride would be reading the scripture. She could have chosen 1 John 4, verse 16, a text well suited for weddings: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God." So on the day of the wedding, she nodded at the friend to come up to read, only to discover that the friend had not written down 1 John 4:16, but the gospel of John, chapter 4, verses 16-19, which read "Jesus said to her, 'God call your husband and come back. The woman answered him, 'I have no husband,' and 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..."

Details matter, and for that reason Dr. Soles says she no longer does a wedding rehearsal without making someone read the scripture they have been given. Here in this story, details matter. Under the scorching heat of the noonday sun, Jesus and a stranger meet. It is clear the gospel is showing us what it means when it tells us God loves the world.

The point is that God's love is offered to her: a Samaritan. A woman. It's so amazing that she leaps up from the conversation, leaving behind the jar she had lugged to the well. She runs home, eager to tell others about this one she has met. And they believe. They believe that he is the Savior of the world – a word never used anywhere else in John's Gospel.

Jesus had to go to Samaria. He had to talk with strangers. He had to let down his guard, to reveal the love of God. He had to let others know the path of salvation, the way of living water.

Let this story be to you a mirror that reflects God's love into your life. And let it be a window to show you what it means to talk with strangers. Amen.