

## **An Unlikely Disciple**

John 4:5-42 (Jesus and the Samaritan woman)

March 23/'14, Pinegrove UC, Third in Lent



A few years ago I was in Las Vegas to visit a big trade show, together with my employer. And I remember walking through that strange town at night, past the Bellagio Hotel. It had a huge man-made lake in front of it, and I noticed lots of excited people gathering in front of it, as if something was about to happen. And sure enough, right at that moment, the scene changed dramatically. Invisible loudspeakers engulfed us in popular opera music, coloured lights repainted the

hotel in fairytale hues; and then, the lake transformed itself into an amazing show of coloured fountains dancing to that music, ending with a fireworks-filled grand finale. It was jaw-droppingly mesmerizing.

But as I took the bus back to my own modest hotel that didn't even have a small pool, I realized: there's something wrong with this picture. We're in the middle of a desert! Water is at a premium here. Am I the only one thinking it is strange to use precious water for a tourist attraction?

Jesus and the Samaritan woman certainly would have looked in horror at this waste of precious resources. It had been another hot day, and Jesus is tired and thirsty after his journey. He gets to community well which had been there for generations upon generations. The disciples have gone to buy some food so he's there by himself, and there's nothing there to draw water with.

This story contains some elements that people who heard it 2000 years ago would immediately have picked up on. But times have changed a lot since then, so those story elements would just fly over our head if we're not careful.

In Jesus day, it was the women who went out to the community well to bring back water to their homes. They brought it in big 10-litre (2.5-gallon) pails, so it was hard, heavy work.

Carrying water was also a social task. Women would gather in groups in the village to go to the local well, which could be quite a ways away from their homes, and they would socialize and help each other with the hard work.

And that's the first red flag in this story. This unnamed Samaritan woman comes to the well by herself, alone! Very unusual. 2000 years ago, anyone hearing this story would immediately knew what this implied: no one wants to be seen with her; she has a "reputation"; yes, this is a "loose woman".

On to the second red flag in this story: In those days a man, and *especially* a rabbi, would not speak to a woman in public unless she was his wife. Women were supposed to only listen to a man, not have discussions with him. And here is Jesus, a celebrated rabbi, having a conversation with a woman. And not in private in someone's home, but in public - red flag nr. three!

Red flag nr. four: Jesus is Jewish and the woman is a Samaritan. The people of Samaria and the people Israel had been at non-speaking terms for about 200 years. They despised each other. In fact it was so bad, they wouldn't even share the same mugs and cups if their life depended on it, as the story reminds us. You could compare it to the situation in Northern Ireland until about 10 years ago, with the Roman Catholics and the Protestant living very close together, but hating each other's guts, torching each others' houses and beating each other up.

So here is Jesus talking to 1) a Samaritan 2) woman 3) with a bad reputation, 4) in public. Everyone hearing this story now knows that whatever may happen next will be remarkable. And they're right. This is a crucial gospel story and it is found only in John's gospel. In this story, it is the loose enemy woman who becomes an unlikely evangelist; it is she who proclaims the good news of Jesus in such a way as to inspire enough belief, or at least curiosity in her neighbours, that they wanted to see for themselves.

One of the marks of a prophet was that the prophet knew things about a person by just meeting them and not being told anything. Jesus did this all the time, and he does it in this story. Without anyone telling him, he knows that this woman has had many husbands and is now living together with her lover, living "in sin" as we used to say.

That is one of the main reasons this woman recognizes Jesus as a prophet: knows very private things about her. On top of that, he treats her like a person, not like the outcast everybody else treated her like, despised by her own people and by the Israelites. That makes him a very *special* prophet - maybe even the Messiah (because the Samaritans also expected the Messiah to come and liberate them, just like the Israelites)!

And that is exactly what she tells the others when she gets back to the village. She tells what just happened and what this special prophet meant to her. Could he be... the Messiah? The other folks in her village recognize that something unusual has happened to her, and they listen to her, and even follow her to her back to the well where Jesus still is, now with his (very confused) disciples. And then we hear that Jesus spends a few more days with this community.

Former opponents, drawn together around the necessity of finding water in the desert, this woman's encounter with Jesus changed her into both a disciple, and

an apostle. It changed her from a stranger - to a learner - to a teacher of others. And by doing that, she broke through old barriers of distrust and hatred that everyone took for granted.

I love the fact that this significant moment happened totally unplanned and spontaneous. Jesus hadn't set this up, there was no slow build-up to a big finale - it just... happened. And it became a landmark moment.

Throughout the gospels it is clear that Jesus' relationships with women were unique for his time. He not only took them serious, he *empowered* them. And here we are, 2000 years later, and we're still fighting over the role of women in the church. We think the United Church is so progressive, but it took us until 1936 for our church to allow the first woman to be ordained as minister, and only after heated discussions. And it took until 1980 for the first female moderator to be elected, Dr. Lois Wilson from... Thunder Bay. And again, only after heated discussions.

And it is only within the last 100 years that women won the right to vote in municipal, provincial and federal elections. Jesus was way ahead of us, and we are only beginning to catch up a little bit.

In this season of Lent we encounter this story about Jesus and the woman of Samaria. We find out that what Jesus did on this day was new and startling, even shocking. All kinds of barriers were broken: barriers of hostility between nations, the barriers between genders, between different faiths, the barriers between this woman and her own community.

And so this woman became an evangelist, someone who proclaims the good news. Isn't it fascinating to see how Jesus makes his disciples from a rag-tag group of losers, under-achievers and outcasts? Despised tax collectors, simple fishermen and loose women. What is that telling us? And: where do we fit in?

In our journey through Lent we are called to be open to the leading of the Spirit; even if the Spirit is beckoning us down paths we have never gone down before. Even if the Spirit invites us to embrace people whom, if we're honest, we'd rather avoid. Jesus was led by the Spirit to do just that, and his disciples were just shocked, they didn't get it.

This story shows us that the water of life may very well be found in some surprising places, and we may be shown to it by some very surprising people, maybe people we never took very seriously, or from a different religion. So let us pray that when that happens, we do get it, unlike the disciples who just thought it was a waste of water in the desert. Amen.