

Face to Face
John 4:5-42
February 24, 2008

If you were here last Sunday, you remember that Jesus had a conversation with Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a leader, “a teacher of Israel,” the ultimate insider who had sought Jesus out by cover of night. Apparently curious about Jesus because of the signs and wonders that Jesus had performed, Nicodemus limited his opportunity to learn more because he began his conversation with an assertion of what he already knew. And it went down hill from there. After Jesus’ first bomb shell that understanding requires being born from above, Nicodemus becomes resistant, defensive, and finally befuddled uttering little more than “How can this be?” several times over as Jesus tells him much more than he ever wanted to know.

Contrast that encounter then with today’s reading, and it’s easy to see that they are a study in opposites. Whereas Nicodemus sought Jesus at night it is Jesus who takes the initiative to approach this nameless woman at noonday. And, if Nicodemus was the ultimate insider, she is the ultimate outsider in every possible way.

First of all, of course, she’s a woman. In Jesus’ time women were not what you’d call “liberated.” They were not allowed to worship with men, whose morning devotions included the prayer, “Thank God I am not a woman.” Women had no place in public life; they were not to be seen or heard, especially not by holy men, who did not even speak to their own wives in public. One group of pious men was known as “the bruised and bleeding Pharisees” because they closed their eyes when they saw a woman coming down the street, even if it meant walking into a wall and breaking their noses!

Secondly, she was a Samaritan. The Jews and the Samaritans had been fighting with each other off and on for 700 years, and Samaritans were considered to be traitors, enemies, and collaborators. Additionally Samaritans recognized only the first five books of the Torah as holy scripture, and they preferred to worship at Mt. Gerazim instead of the temple at Jerusalem. So worse than traitors, they were heretics. The phrase we use so freely “Good Samaritan” was a contradiction in terms in Jesus time. By definition no Samaritan could ever be considered good. To touch anything that they touched was to become unclean and no upstanding Jewish man would be caught speaking to a Samaritan woman, much less eating or drinking from a Samaritan vessel.

And there may be one other thing about her that makes her an outsider. Traditionally it has been suggested that she is a “fallen” woman, a woman with a bad reputation. The reason for that assumption is two-fold. First, she comes to the well alone at noon as opposed to coming with the other village women in the morning for a time that mixed the work of drawing the day’s water with the pleasure of socializing and visiting together. And second, Jesus refers to her several marriages, and the fact that the person with whom she now lives is not her husband. Commentators traditionally have assumed she must have been divorced more times than Elizabeth Taylor, and is now living in sin. But there are other reasons for her situation that are not sinful, just shameful during that period of time. She may have been trapped in a levirate marriage, and the last man in the family had refused to marry her. Tamar, in the Old Testament, was faced with a similar situation. And in Luke’s gospel Jesus is asked a hypothetical question about a woman whose husband had died, so she was married to his brother as was the custom, but then he died, and so on and so on, until finally she died, and the Saducees asked a trick question of Jesus, “who will she be married to in the resurrection?” She may just be more sinned against than sinning.

Gail O’Day suggests in “The Women’s Bible Commentary,” that traditional commentators are often more ready to accept an offer of the gospel to a despised people than

they are to a despised sex.¹ And so through the centuries the woman has been de-legitimated as a conversation partner for Jesus by casting doubt on her moral character and hence her ability to engage in any meaningful dialog with Jesus. She, of course, is not the only woman to have had her reputation tarnished by later generations. Mary Magdalene owes her reputation as a prostitute to Pope Gregory who couldn't stand the idea that there might be another "Mary" in Jesus' life as important to the gospel story as Jesus' mother. And so he began to attack her morality, create all sorts of hypothetical stories about her, and destroy her good name.

But popes and commentators to the contrary, Mary Magdalene and this nameless woman at the well hold places of pre-eminence in the gospel of John. Mary is the first person to recognize the risen Christ; the first one to whom he speaks on Easter morning; she is the one who takes the good news of his resurrection to the disciples, and she thus has the honor of being the first apostle.

And it is with this Samaritan woman that Jesus talks longer than he does to anyone else in all the gospels—longer than he talks to any of his disciples, longer than he talks to any of his accusers, longer than he talks to any of his own family. And, she is the first person he reveals himself to as the messiah in the Gospel of John. She is the first person to guess his identity, and she becomes the first evangelist, the first of all the preachers, the first to run and tell everyone about Jesus. And as she shares her experience with others, it is through her testimony that the Samaritan village is brought to faith.

Whereas Nicodemus gave up easily, and ended his conversation with Jesus inconclusively to say the least, the Samaritan woman engages Jesus in a lively give-and-take conversation of ever-increasing theological import. Sure, she's a little slow at first to catch on that he's talking about one kind of water while she's talking about another, just like Nicodemus struggled with the being born again conundrum. But unlike Nicodemus who was unable to make the connection and advance the conversation, she begins to connect the dots, and then is able to move right on to the heart of the matter – where is the right place to worship, and how should one worship God, and when is the messiah coming, and then she makes yet another leap, returning to her community to announce to them that this man just may be the messiah. She is willing to explore the possibility that God is larger than her preconceptions of God. She reminds me a little of another outsider woman – the Syrophonecian woman in Mark's gospel, who goes toe to toe with a really grumpy Jesus, not giving up, but continuing the conversation—the debate, if you will—until Jesus gives her sick child a blessing. Outsiders in the gospels, it seems, are made of sterner stuff, and they bring out the best in Jesus as well as the best in themselves.

In sticking with Jesus through what is at times a difficult conversation, both intellectually and emotionally, this woman comes to know who Jesus is just as he knows who she is. When he says, "Go call your husband," she confesses to him, "I have no husband." and when she says, "I know the messiah is coming," he reveals to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." Can you feel the drama in this moment?

This is the first time Jesus has identified himself to another living soul. This is a moment of full disclosure, in which this double, maybe triple, outsider and the Messiah of God stand face to face with no pretense about who they are. Both stand fully lit at high noon for this one bright moment in time. And all the rules, taboos, and history that separate them fall forgotten to the ground.

And that is the way it always is. Last week, I shared an Anne Lamott story with you. Today I have another one. Again, in *Traveling Mercies*, she writes about her conversion to Christ. After having had an abortion, night after night she drowned her sorrows in alcohol and codeine. One night she lay in bed, "shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take another sleeping pill," she writes, when she became aware of someone with her, "hunkered down in the corner." She assumed it was the spirit of her father, whose presence she'd felt near her at

other times of distress. But then, she said “I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. . . . I felt him sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love.”

Like the Samaritan woman, it took a little time for her to process what was happening to her. She was a little afraid of letting Jesus in to her life, knowing that to do so would start a long relationship. She felt like a little cat was following her, and she knew that if she picked it up, or opened the door and let it in, gave it a little milk, then it would stay forever. But finally, one Sunday, after church, after the singing had made her feel like it was rocking her in its bosom, holding her like a “scared kid,” she walked home, feeling the little cat running along at her heels, and at her door, she took a deep breath, and said out loud, “All right, you can come in.”²

The Messiah is the one who seeks you out, who finds you in the most unexpected places and at the most unexpected times, and in whose presence you know who you really are – all the good and bad, all the successes and failures, all the hopes and the fears. The Messiah is the one who shows you who you are by showing you who he is—he is the one who crosses all boundaries, breaks all rules, drops all disguises, and speaks to you like someone you have known all your life so that you can go back to face people you perhaps thought you could never face again, speaking to them as boldly and confidently as he spoke to you, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done.”³ May it be so for you and for me as well.

¹ Gail O’Day, *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, Eds., Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992, p. 296.

² Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, New York: Anchor Books, 2000, pp. 49-50.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Face to Face with God,” *Christian Century*, February 28, 1996, p. 227.