**March 23, 2014 – 3rd Sunday of Lent**

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The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is one of the most well known but in some ways least understood stories in the Gospel of John. Here’s a recap: Jesus is not surrounded as usual by his usual flock of disciples because they’ve gone into town to buy food. It’s noontime and presumably hot. I might be wrong but isn’t it ALWAYS hot in Israel? That’s the impression I get, but then my personal thermostat is set differently from most people’s.

Anyway, it’s hot in my imagination, and Jesus is thirsty. Up walks a woman to get water from the well. Here’s where the story goes a little off the rails, I think. Throughout the ages, this woman has always been assumed to be a notorious person. Only a couple of weeks ago, Major Pat was doing a reflection on this passage at the Church Women United gathering, and called her a sinful woman, and she’s not alone in that assessment.

But we don’t really know enough about her to make that determination, or at least to make the determination that she’s any more sinful than any one of us is. Here are the charges laid at her door.

She’s a Samaritan. The Jews of Jesus’ time had a long history of racial hatred of the Samaritans, but we should be careful not to take that hatred as our own, just as we should be careful not to think of all Pharisees as bad. As a matter of fact, the few times that Samaritan individuals have appeared in the New Testament, such as the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan leper who turned back to worship Jesus, and this woman, they actually come off looking pretty good. So we can’t assume she was bad simply because she was a Samaritan

She’s coming to Jacob’s well at noon. Most people would assume that people would want to get their well water first thing in the morning, and from a well closer to the center of town. I don’t necessarily think that this is a bad assumption, at least until we start putting value judgments on top of it. It’s true, she MIGHT be coming to this out-of-the-way well at an odd time of day in order to avoid the judgment and ridicule of the other women of the town.

Or she might not. John doesn’t tell us why this woman is there at that time. Perhaps this well is closer to her house. Maybe she spilled the water she got in the morning and needed more. Or perhaps she just likes the heat. This last one seems incomprehensible to me, but you never know.

And finally, there’s the elephant in the room – all those husbands. Most people assume she’s a sinful woman because she’s living with a man who isn’t her husband, and she had mysteriously gone through five husbands before that, but once again we are putting our own cultural bias onto the situation.

It is possible that her current situation is the product of what’s called a Levirate marriage. This Jewish law is found in Deuteronomy and states that if a married man dies without a son, his brother must marry the widow. But this law, like a few others, has an escape clause for the man but not for the woman. So if the man decides he doesn’t want to marry the widow she’s out of luck. She is not able to marry again and has to rely on the kindness of the community to take care of her. And we all know how well THAT works out sometimes.

Michael and I are friends with a couple who have been together for 25 years or so, but who aren’t married. The reason is that he had been married three times before they got together and all of them had ended in divorce, so this couple figured that they wouldn’t get married since that didn’t seem to work out too well.

So it’s possible that this woman decided, after losing five husbands, that marriage wasn’t for her anymore, like our friends did. But it’s also possible that there was a sixth brother who refused to marry this woman and left her in an impossible situation. Maybe she even had daughters to provide for and when a man offered her his protection she jumped at the chance. Who knows – since five of the brothers died, maybe they were a sickly family and she was just waiting for the last one to go so she could marry the man she was living with.

Yes, these are just assumptions, too. But they serve to show that we have to examine all of our assumptions before making value judgments about people. There’s so much we just can’t know.

So what DO we know about this woman? We know she’s a rule flouter, which ISN’T the same as being sinful. She may have assumed that there wouldn’t be anyone at the well at that time of day, so she might have been surprised to find a Jewish man sitting there. Since the Samaritans held the Jews in the same contempt as vice versa, and since he was a man and she was a woman alone, the proper protocol would have been for them to ignore each other. But then he speaks to her! Again, she should have just gone about her business, but instead, she enters into a debate with him. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" she asks.

It is difficult to hear tone of voice through the written word and across two thousand years, but whatever her motivation – defensiveness, sarcasm, or mere curiosity – she questions Jesus' actions and motives, starting what is the longest conversation that Jesus has with anyone in the Gospel of John. Normally, his conversations quickly evolve into monologues, but not with this woman.

Jesus reveals himself to her in stages during their conversation. He starts with the idea of living water, since water is their point of common interest at first. Though, again, we can’t hear her voice, her sarcasm jumps out at us. Just how are you going to get that fancy water of yours, you who have no bucket, she asks him. Jesus seemingly answers her with non-sequitors. Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, she asks. Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, he responds. Sir, give me this water so that I will never be thirsty and never have to come to this well again, she asks. Go and get your husband, he replies.

This is a turning point in their conversation. She answers truthfully and it’s at this point of real honesty that Jesus engages with her on a personal level. He establishes a relationship with her at that moment. He does not judge her for her choices, but rather commends her for her candor. It’s also at this point that she becomes more than just a Samaritan woman coming to draw water. She is transformed into a spokesperson for her people, to this man whom she has identified as a prophet.

Recognizing that she is in the presence of a prophet of God, she jumps on the opportunity to question him about the theological differences between her religion of Samaria and his Jewish faith. In this questioning, she reveals her own strong faith in God and her expectation of the coming Messiah. She demonstrates a clear understanding of their differences and does not seek to defend or convince. She is just eager to learn the truth. Therefore, because she is ready and willing to hear the truth from Jesus, when he comes to the final stage of his revelation to her and uses the words, "I am," she understands immediately.

At this dramatic moment, the disciples return and are so shocked at the scene that they do not even question it. The woman leaves her water jug behind and runs off to tell the good news to her village.

There are two things to take away from this story. The first is the old adage, never judge a book by its cover. We live in a world of internet memes and tweets, and sound bites. It’s a whole lot easier to make a snap judgment about someone and then summarize that in 144 characters than it is to really try to understand someone. And don’t we sound smart when we do that?

Or if we have an agenda to push, as so many politicians do, it simplifies things to vilify a whole group of people, like poor people, like Native Americans, Hispanics, Koren, African Americans, single mothers, people on welfare, people on unemployment, you name it – the list goes on and on.

Poor people are all lazy, people on welfare are all moochers, Native Americans are all drunks, immigrants are all taking our jobs. Then, once people have been lumped into a bundle and labeled, they are dismissed, or even worse, made out to be the instigator of their own, or all of our, problems. It’s blaming the victim on steroids.

But what happens when we do that is that we miss out on building relationships. We miss out on real community. We miss out on the Gospel being preached to us from an unlikely source. We miss out on seeing the face of God in all of God’s people. And we miss out on doing the work that God has given us to do.

Because the second thing this story tells us is that we are all meant to be apostles. The word *apostello* means to send. Apostles are those who are sent, sent into the world by God to preach the good news. This isn’t some rarified job for preachers and evangelists. This is every Christian’s work on earth.

The Samaritan woman is the first person in the Gospel to be sent out by Jesus. When she set out for the well that day, she had no idea what kind of journey she really was setting out upon. She is remarkable for her frankness, her intelligence, her longing for the truth of God, and her final actions of confident trust. She experiences real transformation from wariness to trust, from questioning to wonderment, and from what may have been the life of an outsider straight into the arms of her village in order to spread the good news with fearless enthusiasm. She truly is the first apostle and an example for us to follow.

But she’s not the last. We are all called to be apostles. We are all being sent into the world to proclaim the Gospel. It’s part of the great commission from the end of the Gospel of Matthew – “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

It’s a big job, but it’s not impossible, just as it wasn’t impossible for a lone woman of Samaria to convince her whole community that the Messiah, the one they’d been waiting for, was sitting just outside of town on the edge of Jacob’s well.

It’s not impossible because we have Jesus with us wherever we go and with whomever we talk to. At the end of that great commission in Matthew, he says, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” We can have confidence in that promise.

Amen.