

Sunday, March 12, 2023
Third Sunday in Lent (Year A)

John 4.5-42

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/759483672190236>

(Sermon begins at about 15:50)

“An Even More Unlikely Guide”

Last week, we encountered an unlikely guide on our Lenten journey in the person of Nicodemus—a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, who made a clandestine, nighttime visit to Jesus. Today, we meet an even more unlikely guide in the person of an unnamed Samaritan woman. As Jesus and his disciples travel through Samaria and approach the city of Sychar, he happens upon this woman who has come to the well to draw water. Thirsty from his travels, Jesus asks the woman for a drink. While this may seem a perfectly normal and reasonable turn of events, to the people of Jesus’ time—to the principal characters in the story, as well as to anyone who would have heard about this encounter—there are just so many red flags. Not just red flags. There were also blaring alarms.

For starters, both Jesus and the woman break not one but two taboos of that time, place, and culture. The first is a restriction against a religious teacher speaking to a woman in public. Particularly without a chaperone, preferably a male relative of the woman. A restriction that largely had to do with the relative status of women at that time and in that culture, further intensified by the fact that religious teachers were generally held to a higher standard. And the second taboo was that this interaction was between a Jew and a Samaritan. This was a centuries old rivalry. Briefly, the reason for this was the fact that while Jews and Samaritans shared a common history and heritage—Samaritans being descended from the Jews—there was a divergence in cultural and religious practices that occurred as a result of the fall of the Kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians in the eighth century BC and the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BC. The Samaritans were the descendants of generations of intermarriage between Jews who were left behind during the exile and the Assyrians who had settled in Israel during the Assyrian conquest. In other words, the intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles. A no-no, for starters. The animosity compounded by the fact that over the centuries, the Samaritans diverged from standard Jewish practices. Most notably that for Samaritans the center of worship is Mount Gerizim, as opposed to the Temple in Jerusalem. The animosity elevating to downright hatred after the Jews destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim in 112 BC. So yeah, things were generally a bit tense between these two groups.

Right off the bat, we have the breaching of two social divisions between Jesus and the Samaritan woman: gender differences and the combined religious and ethnic differences. So, this encounter, and particularly the ensuing conversation, should not have happened at all. Jesus should have just kept right on going, on into Sychar along with his disciples. But there was also another red flag. The fact that the woman was alone at the well in the middle of the day. Typically, women went to draw water in the early morning hours, when it was still cool. And the women of a community went together. It was time to visit and catch up on all the news of the community. The fact that the woman in our story is alone is a pretty good indication that she is

somehow ostracized by the other woman of Sychar. Which, as we find out in the conversation between her and Jesus, she has had five husbands and the man she is currently living with is not her husband. Of course, we don't know the whole story. But certainly the implication is that the woman is, shall we say, a bit "loose," jumping into and out of relationships with any man who comes along. The five previous husbands aside, her living with a man without being married to him would certainly have been frowned upon. It would have even been considered immoral. No self-respecting woman would do such a thing. And no self-respecting women of the community would associate with the likes of her. Hence, her coming to the well alone in the middle of the day.

What ensues in the unorthodox encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is a conversation riddled with wordplay and double meanings surrounding water. Specifically, "living water." Living water was a term commonly used for running water or spring water—to distinguish from well water or water stored in a cistern. And Jesus' use of "living water" as a metaphor, having a completely different meaning. He is talking primarily about himself as this living water, as this water that is the source of eternal life. One of many images used in John's Gospel to describe who Jesus is. And perhaps carrying the additional reference to baptism as the means of incorporation into the Body of Christ and the fellowship of God. Although, like Nicodemus in last week's encounter, the woman cannot even fathom what Jesus is talking about. So, like Nicodemus, she takes Jesus' words literally, thinking that he is offering her a source of spring water. A source of water that would make it easier for her in her daily chores.

Following the discussion about "living water," the whole thing comes out about the woman's previous marriages and her current living situation. Facts that Jesus is well-aware of, and provides proof to the woman that, as she exclaims, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet." Leading to comparisons between Jewish and Samaritan beliefs, which Jesus quickly dismisses as being inconsequential: "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." Followed by his revelation to the woman that he is the Messiah. Prompting her to leave her water jar and run back to town to proclaim the truth that she has witnessed: "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" We are then told that "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony."

Something significant happens as a result of the encounter between the woman and Jesus. There is a strong implication that she is redeemed. Not just in the eyes of Jesus—who never condemned her in the first place. She is also redeemed in the eyes of the people of Sychar. Her testimony is obviously so compelling, so filled with authenticity, that they cannot help but put aside their opinions of her and her lifestyle and believe what she has to say. Believing so strongly that they run out to the well to meet Jesus for themselves. Their own experience of him leads them to true and authentic faith: "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." A statement highlighting the universal nature of who Jesus is and that what he has to offer is not just for Jews, but for the entire world.

This is a story of the Samaritan woman making a journey of discover and self-discovery. She moves from a place of protest and resistance: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a

woman of Samaria?” To a place of misunderstanding: “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” To a place of confession: “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.” To a place of witnessing: “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” Her life will never be the same. Her life of faith has been transformed. And the implication is that the rest of her life, her social standing, has also been transformed.

Aside from providing some central truths about who Jesus is as the source of living water and of eternal life, the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman ultimately is a tale of reconciliation. A tearing down of old systems and the barriers they perpetuated. A tearing down of barriers based on gender and gender identity. A tearing down of barriers based on religious identity. A tearing down of barriers based on ethnic identity—and by extension, racial identity. A tearing down of barriers between enemies. A tearing down of barriers between insiders and outsiders. A tearing down of barriers between “us” and “them.” These are just the barriers that were torn down in this one Gospel story. Applied to our own lives, there are so many other barriers that could also be included. Or rather, that could be torn down.

I opened by saying that today, we meet an even more unlikely guide in the person of an unnamed Samaritan woman. While Jesus is the true guide in the woman’s journey of discovery and self-discovery, it is because of her willingness to engage in an interaction that was forbidden and wrong in so many ways. And yet, became an encounter that was right and needed in so many ways: for her and for the residents of Sychar. And for us, in the lessons that encounter provides. So, in this, she is indeed a guide for us, particularly for our Lenten journey. A journey of discovery and self-discovery. To discover more deeply who Jesus is in our lives of faith. To discover who we are created and called to be as beloveds of God. To discover how we are called to live more fully in our daily lives what we learn during this Lenten journey. The specifics of that journey vary person by person. But at the heart of each of our journeys there is an element of reconciliation. Discerning where reconciliation is needed in our own lives. Be it with ourselves. Be it with our past. Be it with our current life. Be it with others. Be it with religious or social institutions or structures. Be it with God. That unnamed Samaritan woman has been there in her own life and faith journey. She is eminently qualified to be our guide on our journey.

In the Gospel account, the Samaritan woman is never named. Not unusual, particularly for women in Scripture. Obviously, the woman did have a name. And while we do not know what that was, the Eastern Orthodox Church has given her a name: Photini. Greek for “luminous one.” Reflecting the enlightenment she obtained in her encounter with Jesus, the enlightenment that she was able to share with the people of Sychar, and the enlightenment she provides for us on our own Lenten journeys. And as a side note, the Episcopal Church commemorates Photini in our own calendar of saints on February 26th.

As you continue your Lenten journey, may you be guided by the spirit of Photini, the Samaritan woman at the well, on your own journey of discovery and self-discovery. And with her as your guide, may you follow her example and boldly tear down the barriers that stand in the way of your living into the fullness of who God desires and knows you to be.