

Discipleship in the Lectionary - 03/12/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Third Sunday in Lent

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, March 12th

John 4:5-42

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Who is planting the fields?

The Gospel lection for the third Sunday in Lent is from the Gospel of John and contains one of the most famous transformative encounters between Jesus and a stranger - the Samaritan woman at the well. Three elements of this encounter are emphasized here. First, the fact that Jesus even talks with this woman challenges significant socio-cultural norms of the day. Second, the nature of this encounter illustrates coming to faith as a process. Unlike Nicodemus discussed last week, the Samaritan woman moves beyond her confusion. Third, this encounter and the subsequent happenings teach us much about the nature of evangelism and so much more.

John 4:5-42 Commentary

Chapter 4 begins with Jesus learning He was on the Pharisees' radar for baptizing more disciples than John. Avoiding confrontation at this stage, He decides to leave Judea and return to Galilee (4:1-3). As any Bible atlas shows, the easiest way to travel to Galilee from Judea is to head directly North and pass through Samaria yet Samaria was a place to avoid. Jews and Samaritans had no social dealings. This situation dates back to 722 B.C. when the Assyrian captivity was finalized by Sargon. Approximately thirty thousand people from the Northern Kingdom were resettled to other points in the Assyrian Empire. Samaria was then repopulated by captives from other countries.¹ Intermarriage resulted in a mixed race later known as the Samaritans. When the exiles from Judah returned to Jerusalem from Babylon to rebuild the temple, the Samaritans offered assistance, but it was refused. The Jews considered the Samaritans to be ethnically impure. In the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, marriages between Samaritans and Jews were broken up. The Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim. Animosity between the Jews and Samaritans continued into (and beyond) Jesus' time.² Devout Jews would not pass through Samaria due to the ongoing feud and thus doubled the length of their journey by going around.

In v.4 we read how Jesus "*had to*" ("*edei*") pass through Samaria. The Greek word "*dei*" is often associated with a divine imperative - "must" or "necessary". In other words, there is some sense of divine mission connected with this journey rather than simply Jesus being in a rush to get back to Galilee.

¹ K. O. Gangel, *John*, vol. 4, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 74-75.

² C. G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 4, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 139.

⁵ So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

⁶ Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

Jesus is now in Samaria sitting beside a well. His disciples (as we will see shortly) had gone into town to get some provisions. It is about noon (to the Jews, the day began at 6:00 AM).

⁷ A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.)

There are several cultural distinctives involved in this interaction that may not immediately be obvious to us. First, owing to the previously referenced animosity between the Jews and Samaritans, a Jew would not have initiated dialogue with a Samaritan. There is also the added significance here of a Jewish Rabbi asking for water from this place of significance to the Samaritans. Second, Jewish rabbis were not permitted to speak to Jewish women in the street, let alone foreigners. Any conversation with a woman was considered a hindrance to the study of the Torah. Third, if a Jew had accepted water from a foreigner in this way, he would have become ceremonially unclean. Fourth, the woman is at the well at midday - the hottest part of the day. The other women would have come to the well much earlier in the day to perform such a task. This woman is clearly a social outcast (the reason is revealed later). When Jesus opens with "Give me a drink," He is literally turning well-established social, historical, cultural, and religious barriers upside down. All of this would have been immediately obvious to the original audience of this Gospel and clearly significant for how we interpret and apply this Scripture.

⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)

The woman is clearly aware of Jesus' radical behavior. In the opening of this encounter, the woman perceives Jesus simply as a Jew.

¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock."

Rather like the conversation with Nicodemus (3:1-21), Jesus is speaking symbolically on the spiritual level, the woman takes what Jesus is saying as literal and physical. Just like Nicodemus, the woman is confused. Note the significance of Jacob's Well.

¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

Just like with Nicodemus, Jesus' explanation is more confusing. The woman is still thinking of literal water. However, note how now the woman refers to Jesus as "Sir." She realizes He is not just a Jew but perhaps a Rabbi. Despite being confused, the woman remains open to what Jesus is offering.

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." ¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet."

Jesus now ratchets up the conversation. He confronts her with what presumably is the reason for her being a social outcast. Note how Jesus merely confronts her with the facts but there is no judgment of her. We do not know the reason for the woman's situation. It could have been she was involved in a series of levirate marriages where the brother of her deceased husband was forced to marry the widow. Not surprisingly, the surviving sixth brother might be a little hesitant to marry! Regardless, based on Jesus knowing the woman's domestic situation she suspects He is more than a Rabbi. She now refers to Him as a Prophet.

²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.”²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵ The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.”²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.”

The woman continues and notes the rivalry between Mount Gerizim and Jerusalem as sites of worship. Jesus now confronts the woman with something quite radical. Jesus is referring to an age where no temple is necessary to worship God since the Holy Spirit will dwell within God's people. "...salvation is from the Jews" refers to the Messiah coming from the Jewish people. It is the woman who first mentions the Messiah (the Anointed One) using the Jewish word rather than the Samaritan *Taheb*. Jesus makes the most open claim to His identity so far in John's Gospel. In Greek this is *ego eimi* or "I am."

In this one conversation, Jesus was revealed to the woman as first a Jew, then as a Rabbi, then as a Prophet and now as the Messiah. Unlike Nicodemus, *the* teacher of Israel (3:10), who could not get passed his confusion in His conversation with Jesus, the woman persevered.

²⁷ Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you seek?” or, “Why are you talking with her?”

When Jesus' disciples return, they confirm the various taboos involved in this conversation by their surprise but are apparently too embarrassed to say anything.

²⁸ So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, ²⁹ “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” ³⁰ They went out of the town and were coming to him.

The woman most likely expended much physical effort to draw the water from the well. This was her work, yet she literally dropped everything and went back to her village to tell everyone about Jesus. The outcast becomes the evangelist.

³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, “Rabbi, eat.” ³² But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” ³³ So the disciples said to one another, “Has anyone brought him something to eat?” ³⁴ Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. ³⁵ Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. ³⁶ Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

Jesus disciples now become confused. Jesus is speaking about spiritual food, yet they think He is talking about physical food. At this point Jesus points to the fields. The fields being "*white for harvest*" refers to the color of the garments worn by the people from the woman's village coming out to seek Jesus based on the woman's testimony. Here Jesus explains the process of evangelism continuing with the farming analogy. V.36 has allusions to Amos 9:13 and the ushering in of the Messianic age.

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."

This "harvest" among the Samaritans illustrates how Jesus' saving mission transcends the Jews. Indeed, the passage closes with the recognition by the Samaritans that Jesus is the "*Savior of the world*."

Reflections

It is difficult for us to truly appreciate in our more open society the totally radical nature of Jesus' divine appointment with the Samaritan woman at the well. This encounter over-turned some of the most firmly held taboos of the day. Nobody is off limits for the Gospel. God can use anybody to be an evangelist. Yet how many of our churches today exclude people like the woman in this story – despite the All are Welcome sign?

The woman in this meeting with Jesus goes from seeing Jesus as a simply a Jew, then as a Rabbi, then as a Prophet and then as the Messiah. Yet despite Jesus' self-revelation and the woman's evangelistic fervor, the woman still leaves room for doubt: "*Can this be the Christ?*" (v.29) Even though the woman's life was transformed in one encounter with Jesus, coming to faith is still a process. Each of us have our own coming to faith journey. Some may be more dramatic like this woman; others may be more prolonged like Nicodemus.

This story about the woman at the well also indicates how evangelism is also a process. Some may sow, others may water, others may reap. As workers for the harvest, we never know if a seed will germinate, or a specific plant will be harvested. This is all up to God, our role is to do the work we have been called to do.

There are some basic lessons about evangelism in this passage: (1) Sharing the Gospel begins with a conversation. In this case, the opener was a real attention grabber (based on the taboos): "*Give me a drink*." (2) Cultural barriers clearly should be ignored. (3) Jesus was content to teach only one person, yet this one person opened the door for many others. (4) Jesus challenged His disciples to look at the fields that were ripe for harvest. We too must open our eyes and see the harvest around us. (5) Jesus' encounter with the woman at this well in Samaria at this time of the day was no random event. This was a divine appointment. We too must be aware of those similar divine appointments placed in our path. As in this case, the intended recipient may be someone totally unexpected and someone who does not conform to our culturally limited expectations. Imagine how this story would have gone if the Samaritan woman had simply told Jesus where He could shove His request for a drink?!

Application

- Who are your Samaritans?
- When have you felt so transformed by Christ that you left your water by the well – left your work?
- What are you still thirsting for in your life? In what ways might you be estranged from community?
- When did the church stop becoming so radically transformative for the culture – like the founder?!

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