

Third Sunday in Lent – Year A
24 February 2008
St. Anne’s Episcopal Church
Lee’s Summit, Missouri

John 4:1-42

My memories about the story of the Samaritan woman’s conversation with Jesus go back a long way. I was only six or seven. Our Sunday School teacher held a picture as she told the Bible story.

There they were – Jesus, sitting on the edge of the stone wall around the well, and the woman standing near him, looking exotic with her colorful head-dress and a water jar lifted onto her shoulder. And, they were looking at each other, not really looking, more like gazing.

And, even in a still picture, I could see that they were in conversation, deeply in conversation. This woman had Jesus’ attention, and he was listening to her. I don’t know that I remember the story from that morning, but I surely do remember that picture.

A few years later, I learned the traditional interpretation of the story. On a journey through Samaria, Jesus encountered a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. She had come there around noontime, when it was hot and the sun was bright, to draw water. This was unusual, since most women came to the well early in the morning when it was cooler, and they came in a group so they could talk and socialize as they did their work.

But this woman had come to the well by herself. And, since the disciples had gone into town for food, Jesus was alone with the woman. He asked her for a drink. She was surprised by his request, even though it was hot and Jesus must have been thirsty. A Jewish man, like Jesus, would not usually be willing to share things, like a cup, with a Samaritan woman, like her.

Jesus and the woman began to speak about “living water.” In the middle of this conversation, Jesus asked her to go get her husband. She replied that she had no husband.

Jesus quickly told her that she was right in that she was not currently married, but he also added that she had had five husbands and that the man with whom she was now living was not her husband. And so, we discover why the woman was alone at the well in the middle of the day. She was a social outcast, someone with whom other women would not want to socialize.

The woman acknowledged that what Jesus had said about her multiple partners was true and pronounced him a prophet. Then, after some further conversation about the proper place to worship and the coming of a Messiah, Jesus told the woman that he was the expected messiah...”I am he who is speaking to you.” The first time in John’s Gospel that he had expressed that to any person.

The woman believed what Jesus said and had faith in him. She then went into town and told the townspeople what Jesus had said to her and brought them back to meet him.

The summary of this traditional interpretation of the story – the Samaritan woman was a sinner, with multiple husbands and now living in a relationship without the benefit of marriage. She was a social outcast brought to amendment of life, belief, and salvation by Jesus. She told others about how Jesus had known everything about her.

But, is this the *real* picture? Is this the *real* story? Is this the *real* truth that the author of the Fourth Gospel wants to share with us?

Personally, I had my doubts. For me, the picture of this traditional interpretation just didn't make sense. The traditional interpretation focuses on the woman as a serial adulterer who thinks she can lie to Jesus and hide who and what she really is. This interpretation is based on only four verses of the story. If we use a wider focus, this traditional, and very common, I personally don't think this interpretation makes sense for several reasons.

First, there is such slender evidence here and yet such a sweeping judgment. Making this kind of judgment about the woman's sexual morality seems to go against Jesus' explicit and unambiguous command not to judge one another. We just don't seem to know enough to make this kind of judgment.

Also, think about it, women in first century Palestine didn't have the option to make decisions about when to marry or when to terminate a marriage. A woman who had had five husbands must have been someone who had either been cast out by five men or who had lost five husbands to death. And, now the relationship she had perhaps gave her the physical and economic protection she needed in a world that was extremely hostile to unattached women. But, it didn't give her the commitment of marriage. The logic of this woman being a promiscuous sinner just doesn't seem to fit in that culture and time.

Second, Jesus did not ask the woman to repent of the sin of adultery or to leave the man with whom she was currently living and "to sin no more." And, she did not offer any repentance, regret, or explanation. It appears that the multiple marriage situation was a "non-issue" for both Jesus and the woman, because it was never mentioned it again in their conversation.

And, finally, if the woman had been a notorious sinner, a social outcast in the town, would people have listened to her so readily and so completely that they would have immediately gone out to meet Jesus? Would they have taken seriously the witness of someone like her?

Finding the “traditional interpretation” unsatisfactory, I decided to look further. What is the *real* story? What truth can this woman share with us?

Some scholars have asserted that there is no evidence that Jesus ever visited Samaria. There is no mention in the synoptic gospels of Jesus having a ministry in Samaria; and, in fact, in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus commanded his disciples not to enter any town in Samaria. A mission to Samaria is first mentioned in Acts after the martyrdom of Stephen.

So, if this is the case, then why would the Gospel writer have included a story about Jesus in Samaria? Like a number of characters in the Fourth Gospel, the Samaritan woman is not given a name. And, some scholars have suggested that we can possibly view her as a symbolic or representative character.

We can see her as a character in the story and as symbolic of all Samaritans who were followers of Jesus. This makes sense since the Fourth Gospel likely had its source in the Johannine community, a community that included a good number of Samaritan converts.

This story may reflect the history of this community of Christians and may honor a tradition that ascribed a primary role in the conversion of the Samaritans to a woman missionary. The honor given to this woman missionary could explain why the Samaritan woman is portrayed as having a wide-ranging theological discussion with Jesus, why she has been called “the most theologically informed person” in this gospel story.

And, the five husbands and her current partner? What about them in this symbolic interpretation? Some scholars have suggested that the woman's multiple partners represent Samaria's infidelity to the Mosaic covenant and its worship of false gods.

With this new perspective on the story, let's look at the whole story again, not just the "sound bite" version focusing on a few verses. The entire picture not just a small part of it.

The Samaritan woman encountered Jesus at the well. She entered into conversation with him. And, as a result, she was transformed; her life was changed. Much as the Samaritans in the Johannine community had life-changing experiences as they encountered the risen Savior.

As a result of this transformation, the Samaritan woman became an apostle and an evangelist to those in her community. She left her water jar behind to evangelize the town, much as the disciples had left their daily occupations...the tax booth and fishing nets. She served as a witness and brought them to Jesus, like Andrew had brought his brother Simon Peter to Jesus earlier in the Fourth Gospel.

And, after the townspeople encountered Jesus, they, too, believed and declared him to be the "Savior of the world." Again, a pattern no doubt experienced by those in the Johannine community.

While I was in seminary, I saw another picture of the Samaritan woman...this time painted by seminary student. The focus in this picture was different from the one I saw when I was a child in Sunday School.

This time Jesus is not in the picture. The woman stands alone with her water jar. When I saw that picture for the first time, I thought, “That isn’t what she would look like.” I felt so certain my evaluation...”that just isn’t what she would look like.”

And, after some reflection, I realized why I thought she should look different from what I saw in this picture. I realized that I now wanted the picture to look like me. I want to be like the Samaritan woman, the apostle.

I think I may have seen the *real* picture and found the *real* story that the Gospel writer wanted to share with me, with all of us.

This is not a story focused on a forgiven sinner. It is a story about true apostleship and evangelism, with the Samaritan woman as the model for us and for all believers. She encountered Jesus, she entered into conversation with him, she drank of the living water he offered, she left her worship of false gods and her daily occupations, she shared what Jesus had said to her, and she brought others to know Jesus as Savior of the world.

So, in this season of Lent, read the story again. Imagine your own picture of the Samaritan woman at the well. See yourself in the picture as the one who encounters Jesus, engages in conversation with him, is transformed, and becomes an apostle, an evangelist. Share what you have heard and experienced. And, rejoice when those to whom you have gone say, “we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.” AMEN.