

Third Sunday in Lent

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Introduction

Conflicts rarely occur in a vacuum. Today's story is a beloved one, told in the inimitable style of the gospel of John. It's a long dialogue between Jesus and an unnamed Samaritan woman, wherein they speak of faith, and blessing and secrets and religion.

However this story is also a window into a larger reality: the conflicts between Jews and Samaritans; as well as the hinted-at conflict between this woman and her other townspeople. The window of this story opens up a longer, complex reality that incorporates gender, imperial and nationalist powers. A single conflict that occurs between two people sometimes is such a signal: to the old stories that keep recurring again and again.

Text

John 4:5-42

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no

husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 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." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labor."

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. 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 truly the Saviour of the world."

Comment

What cannot be remembered, Freud said, will be repeated. For him, this was the way of describing how people recreate unresolved stories from their past in their present and future. Our unconscious, he argues, is trying to process the unprocessed trauma. This can occur in individuals, and also national or civic traumas can be repeated in individual stories. So, an Irish person and a British person — individuals, each — might find themselves caught in a story of conflict that mirrors 700 years of British-Irish relations; their interaction opens up a window into something that has not yet been remembered well in the larger stories of their belonging. People find themselves wrapped up — or partially wrapped up — in the stories into which they were born.

This isn't to say that the individual dynamics between two people can be entirely explained by their political realities, but it is to say that sometimes the individual stories are linked to a larger story.

So it is here, with the story of Jesus and this remarkable Samaritan woman, whose name we do not know.

On a narrative level, this is one of the extended dialogues that is so characteristic of John's gospel. Jesus has already engaged in a dialogue with Nicodemus (3:1–21), and later on will engage with a crowd (6:22–71), the authorities (7:14–52; 18:12–59; 9:1–41) and the crowd again (10:22–42). So the Samaritan woman sits in with other dialogue partners in the fourth gospel. These dialogues are frequently filled with conflict — the conflict of belief/unbelief, of light/dark, of following/not following. John's gospel has binary themes, and he frequently manifests such themes in the escalated engagements Jesus has. John's gospel was “written that you may believe” and so these dialogues serve to demonstrate what is important to Jesus and — obviously — what the writer of the gospel wishes the reader to grasp. These dialogues serve as a way of embodying the message of Jesus into a tool for the listeners to this gospel to embody in their own lives.

The Samaritan woman is one of the most richly depicted characters of this gospel. When Jesus speaks to her, she questions his audacity in speaking; when he promises her water that will never run out, she replies that he has no bucket. She is quick witted, undaunted, intelligent, observant and engaging. While there is no direct reference to humour or energy between them, the tone of the description and the openheartedness of her language shows her as a person at ease with language, careful about other people's motivations and not ashamed of her needs.

Before looking at any of the rest of the dialogue, it is worthwhile noting what a magnificent character she has — she is a person worthy of being imitated.

The history between Jews and Samaritans is manifest between these two dialogue partners. To hop-skip-and-jump through centuries of history (apologies to historians) here's a brief historical sketch: Samaritans, it's thought, were part of a remnant of Jews left behind after the initial conquest of the ten northern tribes of Israel by Assyrians in about the seventh century BCE. Those who stayed behind — or, more accurately, were left behind — intermarried with other peoples. Their Jewish practices became mixed with other religious practices; and while it maintained many of the aspects of Judaism, was distinct enough to cause significant sectarian anxiety between the two belongings. These two religious devotions were not as far apart as some depictions imagine; they did worship on different mountains, yes, but many of the emendations of the Samaritan Torah are what finally ended up in an agreed-upon Torah of Judaism.

So representatives of two people are speaking to each other. Their conversation can be seen to begin as representative of their gender identities; then move on to their religious/political identities; before finally getting personal.

The Samaritan woman's surprise that a Jewish man is speaking to her is evident and engaging. She is well up for banter, and is brilliant with it, through gender norms and religious conversations. There is, however, a possible hint of her own possible isolation in the text. She is at the well collecting water at the hottest time of the day. Others from her village would have been there earlier, when it was cooler. Why was she there so late? It's possible her reputation meant either that she was shunned, or that she avoided the company of people who would potentially shun her. The invitation of Jesus for her to call her husband could be seen as an indication that he wishes her to be met with hospitality at the deepest place of her isolation from her community; surely a confronting invitation, and one that can be considered for all readers of religious texts — namely, meet your God in the places you normally hide from.

Of course, there is also a possible national explanation for this. The extraordinary biblical scholar Sandra Schneiders suggests that the five husbands may be a literary device to refer to the infidelities of Samaria in straying and dabbling in false gods. If so, then the reading continues to have deep theological resonances: a shunned person becomes a missionary to her community, giving a vital and salvific message to people who would seem to rather avoid her company.

Whether she is a symbol for her people, or an historical person in her own right, a message remains: remember yourself in a new way so that you do not need to repeat and project your past compulsively, but rather than re-member the story of yourself into a new form of freedom and belonging. This is at the heart of being a person of peace, a person who can be fully present — with insight, humour, intuition and spontaneity — in conflicts.

Response

For private reflection: How might current, difficult relationships be understood as a window into something that needs to be remembered in a new way so that the past does not keep repeating itself.

What role can vulnerability, spontaneity, freedom and conversation have in this imaginative re-membering?

Prayer

Thirsty Jesus,
you sat by a well and instead of reaching in yourself
created community with someone who came seeking solitude.
In all our solitudes, meet us,
especially in the solitudes where we cannot recognise
how we are repeating the same dry story.
Because yours is the water
that refreshes dry stories
so that they may spring up
with new life
and give life to many.

Amen.