

A reflection from the wilderness of isolation on John 4:5-42
by Kellie Browne

Last Sunday, we looked at the story of Nicodemus, a Pharisee who comes to Jesus in the middle of the night. He and Jesus have a conversation in which Nicodemus fails to come to a full understanding of who Jesus is and what he is teaching. The story is set in Judea and is an encounter between Jesus and a man who is a religious authority. Nicodemus cannot move beyond the confines of his religious system to grasp the meaning of Jesus' teaching.

The rather lengthy reading for this morning offers a parallel experience—only this time Jesus' conversation partner is much more surprising. Traveling from Judea to Galilee, Jesus passes through Samaria where he initiates a conversation with a character who is a Samaritan—a religious, political, and cultural outsider—not only these, but she is a nameless woman who meets Jesus under the bright noonday sun. Jesus smashes boundary after boundary to talk with this woman.

The deep shock of Jesus disciples when they return from getting food to find Jesus and the woman in conversation emphasizes the scandalousness of the story. Incidentally, the account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman is one of the lengthiest conversations in John's gospel. It is one we simply cannot overlook.

This morning, as we find ourselves isolated in our homes and away from the sanctuary, I encourage you to read John 4:5-42 slowly and prayerfully. You might like to sit in your favorite chair, grab a warm beverage, and savor the possibilities as you digest the passage. Invite the Spirit to sit with you and pore over these words to explore the depth and breadth of God's love in Jesus Christ—not only for “insiders” like Nicodemus and the disciples and us, but especially for “outsiders” like the Samaritan woman and those we might consider to be foreign in some way, too.

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus featured Nicodemus' literal interpretation and understanding of Jesus' metaphorical language. They were like two ships passing in the night whose paths never crossed in a meaningful way. While Nicodemus did gain a kernel of understanding, for the most part he missed the heart of what Jesus told him. His preconceived ideas and the confines of the religious system he represents prevented him from grasping something different and new. In a sense, he heard what he expected/wanted to hear and did not open himself to the possibility that Jesus had something different to offer.

The encounter with the Samaritan woman is utterly different. True, it begins with a literal request for a drink of water from a man who had no business talking to her—but it moved on to the language of God's kingdom. Jesus moved from the still well-water that has the power to quench one's thirst for a time to the living water that “will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14). Those who receive the gift of living water will never be thirsty again. Where Nicodemus might have broken this sentence down and questioned Jesus relentlessly on what this water is and where it can be found, the woman simply asks for it, wanting anything that would relieve her of thirst and of the tedious chore of coming to the well for water every day. Her understanding remains fairly literal, but she engages with the possibility that Jesus is speaking of something more. He then

reveals a deep knowledge of the particulars of this woman's life, offering her proof that he is a prophet, if not more.

Seizing the opportunity to unpack his meaning further, she addresses the religious boundaries between them. Specifically, she questions which side is the "right side"—his people who worship in Jerusalem or her people who worship on the mountain in Samaria. Jesus' answer destroys this boundary, too: the location is not what matters, but the manner of worship is key.*

Those who worship God in spirit and truth—they are the ones the Father seeks. Freed of this boundary, the woman steps forward with Jesus—"I know the Messiah is coming..." (John 4:26) The Messiah is the one who will proclaim all things. The Messiah is the key. Affirming the woman's openness and faith, Jesus proclaims, "I am he, the one who is coming is speaking to you."

The disciples return at this moment and they are shocked at what they find. Jesus dares to speak to this outsider—and yet they judge him silently. The woman drops her jar and runs to her community, eager to share what she has experienced.

While Nicodemus left Jesus with lingering disbelief, "How can these things be?" (John 3:9), this woman leaves full of new possibility, "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" (John 4:29).

Her testimony to her community results in many more people coming to Jesus to see for themselves. The woman has become a disciple in her own right, leading others to find Jesus and see for themselves. By the end of the reading, these people have claimed their faith as their own, no longer based simply on the testimony of the woman.

What sets this Samaritan woman apart is this—while she begins listening to Jesus on the same literal plain as Nicodemus, she quickly recognizes that something else is at stake. Jesus has something she needs and she is able to ask for what he has. She opens herself to the possibilities of something more, something new and different, and asks Jesus for help.

Karoline M. Lewis writes, "We learn from the Samaritan woman that in our own encounters with Jesus, we are not only changed, but what God reveals to us changes as well."

I pray that as we find ourselves apart from each other and from our usual location of worship, we might each allow Jesus to engage us in conversation by our own wells. May we open ourselves to listen and to speak and to allow God to show us something new. Not only that, but may we have the courage to come together open to seeing how God has shaped us in the wilderness.

* Something to remember, and find comfort in, during the closure of the church as we practice social distancing for the health of the church and of the city in this Coronavirus pandemic!