

The Samaritan Woman at Jacob's Well: An Inspiration for Our Spiritual Life March 12, 2020

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Introduction

1. The fascinating dialogue between Jesus and the unnamed Samaritan woman is a rich resource for spiritual growth (John 4:5-42). It is the Gospel for the Third Sunday of Lent, Cycle A, March 15, 2020.
2. Exegesis (from the Greek "to lead out") is a method of interpreting Scripture that takes into account the origin, background, literary form and grammar of the text to bring out the meaning intended by the author. It is also called biblical hermeneutics and is contrasted with eisegesis reading into the text one's own meaning.
3. The woman suggests ways to grow spiritually: staying open to deeper meaning; overcoming personal obstacles; coming to know Jesus better; sharing the good news.
4. Helpful readings: *Introduction to the New Testament; Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year; The Community of the Beloved Disciple; 2 Volume Commentary on John's Gospel* in the Anchor Bible series by Raymond Brown (1928-1998), one of the world's finest scholars on John's Gospel; *Christ* by Edward Schillebeeckx (especially pp. 305-427).

I. The Text

A. Complete story is in John 4: 5-42

B. Shortened version (4:5-26) from the Revised Common Lectionary

4:5 So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

4:6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

4:7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."

4:8 (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food).

4:9 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.)

4:10 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."

4:11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"

4:12 Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

4:13 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,

4:14 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."

4:15 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."

4:16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."

4:17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "you are right in saying, 'I have no husband';

4:18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

4:19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet.

4:20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

4:21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.

4:22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

4:23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.

4:24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

4:25 The woman said to him, "I know the Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

4:26 Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

II. John's Gospel

A. Historical Context

1. Author: probably a disciple of the Beloved Disciple (not John the Apostle).
2. Date: middle 90s with some editions by a final editor c100-110.
3. Composition: a community comprised of Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles formed in Palestine around the Beloved Disciple an eyewitness with distinctive memories of Jesus, including a high Christology which got them thrown out of the local synagogue. The encouragement and guidance of their leader during this contentious period earned him the title of the Beloved Disciple though he was probably not that prominent during the public ministry of Jesus. Eventually the community or part of it moved possibly to Ephesus where a school of disciples of the now deceased Beloved Disciple wrote the Gospel, revised it and composed the three letters of John.
4. The Johannine community was united against outsiders: unbelievers, followers of the Baptist; the Apostolic Churches represented by Peter; the Jews who would not accept Jesus; Christian Jews who were afraid to profess their faith.

B. Literary Analysis

1. Jesus speaks more solemnly in John than other Gospels; some would call his style "semi-poetic." John's Jesus uses figurative language and metaphors to describe himself and his message and uses misunderstanding to explain his meanings (for example, living water with Samaritan woman). There are double meanings (for

- example, Lamb of God can mean the paschal lamb or the suffering servant who went to slaughter like a lamb.) Use of irony, inclusions and explanations of Semitic terms (Messiah, for example)
2. The prologue is a beautiful poetic piece, dealing with how “that which was” crossed over into becoming – a theme carried out through the whole Gospel.
 3. John structures the Gospel around seven miracle stories or signs, followed by the Book of Glory.

III. The Samaritan Woman at the Well

- A. John’s narrative skills invite us to identify with the woman and learn from her developing reaction to Jesus.
- B. Commentary in general
 1. Background: Samaritans were descendants of Jews who intermarried with Babylonian colonists. In 128 B.C. the Jewish high priest burned the Samaritan Temple on Mt. Gerazim. Jews consider Samaritan women ritually impure. The 6th hour, noon, is an unusual time to come to the well. Five husbands could be literal - Jews were allowed three marriages (Brown) or allegorical reference to five pagan deities. Living water refers to the revelation brought by Jesus and the Spirit he sends. Worship in spirit and truth suggests Jesus replaces all Temples as the true mediator.
 2. Meaning: Jesus guides her to overcome her enmity and fear of Jews and to come to understand him as the Messiah source of living water. Past sins are not an obstacle to conversion and spiritual growth. Beware of distortions and idols that prevent us from responding to Christ. The woman evangelizes others suggesting that is our task as well.
 3. A spiritual reading (cf *Gospel Light* by John Shea). Jesus is a man who gets tired, needs a drink, seeks deeper conversations (we can imagine him being grateful to find someone who could understand him). Jesus is a prophet who can help us deal with confusion, fears. Living water does not diminish when we share it (a renewable resource).
- C. Scene One – the dialogue, 4:1-21
 1. First dialogue with three exchanges (7-10): Jesus violates social custom and asks for water (7) and she mocks Jesus for violating propriety: he issues a two part challenge if she recognizes him, she will ask for living water.
 2. Second dialogue (11-15): she misunderstands the water, taking it literally; Jesus clarifies this is heavenly water; she is intrigued and asks for it.
 3. Third dialogue (16-18): Jesus refers to her personal life; she gives a deceptive answer and he notes her misconduct inviting her to see the light.
 4. Fourth dialogue (19-26): she moves forward by bringing up worship, Jesus speaks of worship in spirit and truth and she recognizes something more about Jesus.

5. We are all called to recognize the true identity of Jesus and to ask for living water.
- D. Living Water (10-14)
1. The revelation or teaching of Jesus. In OT water symbolizes God's wisdom and gift of life. Sirach 24:21 has wisdom say "he who drinks of me will thirst for more." The Qumran community described the Law as "living water." John's Gospel sees Jesus as divine wisdom and the replacement of the Law.
 2. Living Water can also refer to the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus. In John 7:37-39 Jesus says "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me; let him drink who believes in me, Scripture has it: From within him rivers of living water shall flow" and the evangelist adds he was referring to the Spirit, whom believers would receive.
 3. We are reminded that we have received the living water in our baptism.
- E. The Second Scene (4:27-38)
1. The disciples return and are surprised Jesus is talking to a woman and misunderstand the statement by Jesus "I have food" taking it literally.
 2. The woman goes to her town (leaving her water jar) and suggests Jesus could be the Messiah, functioning as an evangelist; the town folk come to see Jesus, get him to stay with them for two days and decide he is "truly the Savior of the world."

IV. Interpretation of 5 husbands

- A. Literal – cf Ray Brown
1. She had 5 husbands and was living with a man without being married.
 2. Negative interpretation - that she was an immoral woman who got divorced 5 times but this is not plausible because women in that culture could not initiate a divorce. Jesus brought up the issue to unlock her heart to deeper conversion. She was at the well at noon by herself because she was shunned by the other women.
 3. Benign interpretation – 5 husbands divorced her or died leaving her defenseless in a patriarchal culture so she is living with a man for protection. Jesus sees her in a positive light, concentrating on her potential and not her past life. The woman is then a model of not being limited by previous life but staying open to a better future.
- B. Symbolic interpretations – cf Sandra Schneiders, Christine Schenk
1. Five husbands refers to false gods the Samaritans have worshiped; or she represents Samaritans as a whole who have strayed from strict Jewish monotheism.
 2. By bringing it up, Jesus is opening up a conversation not about morality but about religious worship which goes deeper and could be seen as the center point of the dialogue on worship in spirit and truth. Jesus himself replaces the Temples.
 3. Having the woman come to the well at noon is a symbolic reminder that Jacob met Rachel at the well at midday (Genesis 29:1-20).

4. She got a hearing from the men in her town which would be unlikely for a public sinner.
5. She proves to be more open to symbolic language than the Pharisee and Sanhedrin member Nicodemus who fails to understand the symbolic teaching of Jesus on rebirth (John 3: 1-21). She is more like Martha, sister to Lazarus, and Mary of Magdala in understanding Jesus.
6. For Jesus living water is symbolic of his teaching on the Holy Spirit and his mention of food refers to God's grace.
7. Going beyond a perception of her as a sinner enables us to see her as a bright, feisty, politically aware, theologically knowledgeable, collaborator with Jesus in challenging the historic enmity between Jews and Samaritans.
8. Note the great irony in her comment about Jesus claiming to be greater than Jacob.
9. Jesus accepts the title Messiah from a Samaritan while being more leery of it when offered by Jews probably because of political significance.
10. Jesus' statement, "I am he" could have divine implications.

V. Application

- A. The woman can serve as a spiritual guide
- B. Specific advice
 1. Move beyond literal meaning to a deeper understanding.
 2. Engage with Christ and his teaching to grow spiritually.
 3. Do not let past failures and misconduct prevent opportunities for spiritual growth.
 4. Reflect on the significance of baptism and its call to holiness and responsibility for the Church.
 5. Incorporate the Holy Spirit (the living water) in our prayer and spirituality.
 6. Find ways to share the good news with others in our daily lives.
 7. Work to tear down walls and build bridges to overcome polarization and form community.

Father Bacik's 2020 Lecture Schedule:

Thursday, April 2: Did Pope Francis Really Say No to Ordaining Married Men and Women Deacons?

Thursday, May 21: *Annual Karl Rahner Lecture*

Thursday, June 18: *Topic TBD*

Thursday, July 23: *Topic TBD*

Thursday, August 13: *Topic TBD*

Thursday, September 10: *Topic TBD*

Thursday, October 15: *Topic TBD*

Thursday, November 19: *Topic TBD*

Thursday, December 17: *Advent Reflection*