



University Christian Church – Austin

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Living Water

Lent 3, a, Feb. 24, 2008

John 4:5-29

Frankly, sometimes it puzzles me, trying to understand how it is that we Christians got so far off the track that Jesus showed us. The great advances in 20th-century theology and biblical study include a heightened recognition of the place that women played in the earliest Christian church, the roles that they took on and the leadership that they exercised. How is it then that over the years the development led to such a minimizing of women's roles in the church?

Why, all we have to do is open up the Gospels and we can find all kinds of wonderful stories of how it is that women were vehicles for the grace of God. This passage from the Gospel of John that Roslyn read for us is a prime example. And even the insight into it bespeaks an inner irony. It took the preaching of a woman by the name of Barbara Brown Taylor, who is currently a professor at Piedmont College and Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, to open my eyes to what was taking place in this passage, and I am indebted to her. She is the one pointed out that in the Gospel, Jesus talks to this woman at the well longer than he talks to any of his disciples, longer than he talks to his accusers in many of his confrontations, longer than he talks to even the members of his own family! ⁱ

It is this woman at the well who was the first person that he reveals himself to- in the Gospel of John- as the Messiah. She is the first evangelist,

as the story unfolds and we see her spreading the word among those of her community. How is it with this auspicious beginning the church was able to silence and ignore the gifts of women?

But Jesus' choice of this woman is even more interesting. Rather than have someone close to him be the first bearer of witness, Jesus chooses this woman who is an outsider in multiple ways.

First off as the story is clear, she was a Samaritan, one of those with whom the Jews constantly struggled.

Second, she was a woman. You remember of course that women could not worship in the same place as men, but it was even more striking than that. Out in public men would not even speak with their own wives! Women were, as a speaker in our Monday night Bible study said last week, to be in the kitchen and in the bedroom.

But there's one more aspect of this woman that stands out this particular woman was not at the well when one would have expected. It was customary for women to gather at the well in the morning to fill their clay jars with the necessity of the day. It was a time of social interaction, of catching up with one another, one of those rare opportunities that women of that day would have to freely intermingle with anyone. It was a time of day when gossip would have been natural and common and this woman, the woman that Jesus chooses to engage in conversation is clearly one of those women that would have been the object of the gossip on many occasions. She would not have been welcome with the good women of the village because in the same way we make jokes about the multiple marriages of Elizabeth Taylor, they would have made jokes and expressed their disdain for a woman married so many times.

So this woman, this Samaritan woman at the well, arrives at the well in the heat of the day to find this strange man sitting there. He asked her for a drink, a clear “no no.” What's more surprising is that this man is a Jew! It would be clear from the physical features of his face and the skin tone that he was out of place here in Samaria. And what is he crazy? Didn't he realize that he was not supposed to talk to women? Didn't he know that if she was to give him water, to drink from her water jar, they would both be breaking the law of that day?

In the way that the Gospel of John likes to use in all kinds of conversations, what transpires here is the woman engages in the interchange with one set of understandings and Jesus speaking in a way that would be mysterious to her as he speaks on another level altogether. As readers in the early church or even today, it is assumed that we would have that extra insight so we know that what Jesus is saying is so much more than what she's able to receive, but this woman is smart enough to know that what he is speaking of should be something that she gets!

“Sir, give me this water,” she asks.

And here the really mysterious begins. Jesus abruptly changes the question, “go to fetch your husband.” She might have objected that he was getting far too personal, but, interestingly, now, rather than make up a story, rather than lie, or change the subject again she responds directly to Jesus.

“I have no husband.” With that opening, Jesus proceeds to tell her her life story, the tale of her broken relationships, the sordid story that has made her life situation so difficult. And I suspect some of you may be imagining here Jesus as some kind of Sherlock Holmes who has pieced together the circumstances of the situation so as to guess what her background is.

But that would not be fair to the image of Jesus that the Gospel of John consistently portrays. For John, Jesus fairly floats above the earth. We constantly assert the divine and human characteristics of Jesus, but John's Jesus is so divine that it's very easy to assume he means here Jesus to be exhibiting some supernatural power, to see into her past or know the circumstances in some superhuman fashion. And yet, even with his advanced capacity to know without conversing, Jesus seems to be moving this conversation someplace in particular, someplace important, not necessarily for him, but for this woman, this lonely woman, for whom Jesus is expressing a deep compassion. Their conversation returns to the topic of religion and she confesses that faith common to both of their peoples, "I know that the Messiah is coming," to which Jesus says simply, straightforwardly, in a way that he has made known to no one else, "I am he."

Strange, isn't it? Jesus unveils himself to the world in the person of a foreigner, an outcast, a woman. And in the process, they both have been unmasked. They both have been revealed. And there they stand, nothing to hide. In that moment the customs, the cultures, the laws, even the supposed common sense which might have kept them apart, kept them from allowing this conversation to unfold -- all of these crutches are thrown aside and they stand there completely bared, completely open.

Let me suggest that perhaps this is the great gift we receive would when the Messiah comes. Not only do we know how it is that God is breaking in to reform our lives for the positive, but all the tightly held and intently maintained pretense in our lives...falls, just falls to the ground both unable and unneeded. When the Messiah truly and personally comes to us, we are able to admit, to confess, to share openly the good and the bad of our

lives, the giftedness and the brokenness, and to find in that readiness to shed the sham, a new gift -- a gift from the Spirit of God:

- An experience of forgiveness that washes us clean;
- An experience of freedom from our past, and for God's future through us
- An experience of a deep, deep trust that God's love for us is absolutely
enough, enough.

"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."

"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."

It is a gift that is an ecstatic opportunity to recognize again - or for the very first time-

- that nothing about who we are, our gender, our race, our status,
- nothing about relationships we've had that have flourished or failed
- that nothing we have done or said,
- or left undone or unsaid,
- any reality constructed or any dream unfulfilled,
- nothing, my friends, as our sister at the well discovered, nothing can separate us from the love of God! Thanks be to God!

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ⁱ This sermon is highly indebted – in structure, content and intent- to this marvelous article by Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor's on this John 4:5-42 passage that I found in the *Christian Century*, Feb. 28, 1996.