

Face to Face

Lent 3, Year A – John 4:1-12

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, March 23, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Whew! That was a long Gospel reading. In point of fact, the record of Jesus' conversation with this "woman at the well" is longer than any other conversation in all the Gospels. Jesus talks with this woman longer than he talks to any of his disciples, longer than he talks to any of his accusers, longer than he talks to any of his own family. In *John's* Gospel, this woman is the first person to whom Jesus reveals himself. Among *all* the Gospels, she is the first *outsider* to guess who Jesus really is. What's more, John tells us that she is the first *evangelist*, the first "teller of the Good News," and we hear at the *end* of the story that because of *her* testimony, many came to faith.

Jesus's choice of this woman is a curious one. Because when I say she was an outsider, I mean she was an *outsider*. As a major player in the story of the Good News, the Woman at the Well comes to the plate with three strikes against her:

In the first place, this woman was a Samaritan. During the Babylonian exile, her ancestors had played fast and loose with the practices of ritual and righteousness followed by *faithful* Jews. And when the People of God had returned to the Promised Land, *her* people kept *up* their wayward ways. In the eyes of just about every character you read about in the Gospels, the Samaritans didn't worship in the right way, or in the right place. They didn't follow the teachings of the prophets. They continued to marry, and reproduce, outside their own kind. As far as any *good* Jew was concerned, this *Samaritan* woman was a half-breed, and full pagan.

She was *also*, of course, a *woman*. In Jesus's time, women were not what you would call liberated. Among faithful Jews, women were not part of the worship of men, whose morning devotions included the prayer, "Thank God I am not a woman." Women had no place in public life. They were not to be seen or heard, especially not by holy men, who did not speak to their own wives in public. One group of pious men in Jesus's day was known as "the bruised and bleeding Pharisees" because they closed their eyes when they saw a woman coming down the street, even if it meant walking into a wall and breaking their noses.

This woman Jesus met at the well that day, was a Samaritan, and she was a woman, but that's not all, is it? She was also *that* kind of woman. Respectable women made their trips to the well in the morning, when they could greet one another and gossip – I mean, talk about the *news*. But this woman was one of the people they talked *about*. The fact that this woman showed up at noon in the story, is a sure sign she was not welcome at the morning social hour. As Jesus eventually told *her*, she had been married as many times as Elizabeth Taylor and was living in sin at that very moment. And so it was just a better idea all around, that this Samaritan woman went to the well *alone*, and that she just stayed an *outsider*, three times removed.

So imagine her surprise when she comes in the heat of the day with her water bucket balanced on her head and sees a strange man sitting beside the well. He could be anyone, but when he lifts his head and asks her for a drink, she sees the olive skin, she sees the dark eyes, she sees the strong nose. This man is no half-breed; the man is a *Jew*. But what in the world is he doing there? The Jews have endless rules about what they may and may not eat and drink. Has he lost his way? She knows this man will be breaking the law if she lets him sip from her bucket. Has he lost his faith, to be talking to *her* like that?

So they talk about it, and while the story is never clear whether they are on the same wavelength, the woman *does* understand that she *wants* what Jesus is offering her. "Sir, give *me* this water," she says, "so that I will never be thirsty again." Wow! What an exclamation! What an end to the conversation!

But Jesus changes the subject. “Go get your husband.” She might say, “I thought we were talking about religion. Why are *you* getting so personal all of a sudden?” Shoot she might have just lied. “He’s... ah... *busy* this time of day.” Instead, this woman, this Samaritan woman, this fallen Samaritan woman, squares her shoulders and looks Jesus right in the eye. “I have no husband,” she says. And with that taste of truth from her, Jesus tells *her* the *rest* of the truth about herself. Jesus doesn’t pull away. He still wants a drink from her, he still wants to give her a drink as well, only the intimacy of it all seems suddenly too much for this woman at the well.

So she changes the subject back to religion again, trying to draw him back into an argument about Jews versus Samaritans. You can hardly blame her. If he knows about all her husbands, there is no telling what *else* he knows. And she decides she would rather not find out. It is time to introduce some mental static so the at the man with the X-ray eyes cannot read her so well, time to step back from him and cover herself up again. But it does not work. When she steps back, he steps forward. When she steps out of the light, he brings the light to her. If she is determined to show him less of herself, then he will show her more of *himself*. “I know that Messiah is coming,” she says. And he says, “Here I am.”

This right here is the first time in all the Gospel story, that Jesus has said that to another living soul. It is a moment of full disclosure, in which the triple outsider, and the Messiah of God, stand face to face with no pretense about who they are. Both stand fully lit at high noon for one bright moment, while all the rules, and all the taboos, and all the history that separate them, fall forgotten to the ground.

By telling the woman who she is, Jesus shows her who *he* is. By confirming *her* true identity, Jesus reveals his own. And, you know, that is how it *still* happens. The Messiah is the one in whose presence you finally come to know who you really *are* – the good and bad of it, the all of it, the hope in it. The Messiah, the Christ, is the one who shows you who you are by showing you who he is. Christ is the one who crosses all boundaries. Christ is the one who breaks all rules. Christ is the one who drops all disguises. Jesus Christ is the one who is able to fill you with the living water of his Holy Spirit, to send you back to face people you thought you could never face again, to send you as his witness, to speak to them as boldly as *he* has spoken to you, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done.”

It is my prayer for this Lent, that *that* hope, and *that* boldness, and *that* living spring, will fill *each* of our hearts to overflowing, so that we can share that living water, with *other* hearts that are parched for the life-giving love of Christ.

Amen.