

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
Lent 3, Year A
John 4:5-42

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Today's program is sponsored by John Hodges in memory of his brother Charles "Chip" Hodges, who was buried on St. Patrick's Day 10 years ago.

Sometimes, the best place to begin is at the beginning. Today we will do something a little different, and begin before the beginning. As we follow our Sunday lectionary, we take a detour from the gospel of Matthew during Lent and spend four weeks in a row in the gospel of John, and after Easter we will spend another five weeks in a row in the gospel of John. So while we could begin at the beginning of today's passage about Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman here in John 4, there are additional insights that become visible to us if we begin a little earlier and look at it in the context of the passage right before it, which we read last week, which is Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3.

In many ways, John has set up these two scenes in contrast with each other. Nicodemus is male, the Samaritan woman is female; Nicodemus is a Jew, the Samaritan woman is a Samaritan (a different nationality and religion); Nicodemus has the respected status of a Pharisee, the Samaritan woman has no status in society whatsoever, not even the most basic status of someone's wife; Nicodemus has heard about Jesus and comes to seek him out; the Samaritan woman is getting her water from the well at the hottest part of the day in an attempt to avoid meeting any people, and she and Jesus are strangers to each other. Nicodemus meets Jesus by night, and the Samaritan woman meets Jesus at noon.

These contrasts are interesting in themselves. They are also significant because each of them is an indicator of the us-them distinctions that are so much a part of society, the distinctions that separate the insiders from the outsiders, the who-we-are separated from The Other. So

Nicodemus, like Jesus, is male; the outsider is female.

Nicodemus, like Jesus, is a Jew; the outsider is a Samaritan.

Nicodemus, like Jesus, is addressed by the respected title “Teacher”; the outsider has not only no title, she is so unimportant that even her name is never given.

Nicodemus is in the group that knows what Jesus has been doing and what signs he’s been performing and has the background to know that no one could do these signs apart from God; the outsider is so keenly aware of her status as an outsider and a stranger that the first words out of her mouth express her surprise that a Jew would want to interact in any way whatsoever with a Samaritan.

Nicodemus has the confidence to engage in a conversation with Jesus; the outsider is afraid of any conversation with anyone. In a moment, we will come back to these insider-outsider, us-them issues, and how Jesus handles them.

There is one more contrast. You will remember that last week we talked about the way Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, in a visual image of Nicodemus coming out of the shadows to look at Jesus, who is the light shining in the darkness. And you will remember that last week we talked about the other image Jesus gives us in that passage, the image of birth, in which each of us emerges from the darkness of the womb into the light of day. Jesus talks to Nicodemus about the need to be born from above.

Unfortunately, Nicodemus doesn’t seem to get any farther than exclaiming, “How can this be? Can someone enter a second time into the mother’s womb to be born?” Jesus tells him, “Do not be astonished that I said to you, you must be born from above” but there is no indication in the text that Nicodemus does get beyond a sense of astonishment. Jesus goes on to talk about how God loved the world so much that he gave his Son, and then Jesus goes on to say, “The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” The contrast here is that Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, and he stays spiritually in the dark. This contrasts with the outsider who meets Jesus at noon.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he needs to be born from above, and Nicodemus isn’t even able to process that concept, so Nicodemus stays spiritually in the dark. By

contrast, the new birth that Jesus has been talking about actually happens here in the life of the Samaritan woman, and we as the readers get to watch her spiritual transformation.

One of the commentators I read, Alan Culpepper, pointed out another way in which this scripture is a kind of ironic mirror image of other scriptures. He mentioned that a scriptural scene of meeting the woman you'll marry at a well appears not just once in the Old Testament; meeting the woman you will marry at a well is described as happening for Abraham, Issac, Jacob, and Moses. These scenes follow a similar pattern: "the encounter takes place in a foreign land, the protagonist...does or says something characteristic of his role in the story, one of the other of them will draw water, and the maiden will rush home and prepare for the man's coming to meet her father and eat with them. A wedding will follow." Many of these elements have ironic reversals in this scene in John's gospel.

I began to wonder why this meeting a woman at a well would be its own miniature genre in scripture. The most obvious reason would be that in a wide variety of cultures, both ancient and modern, the work of going to the well to get the family's water and bringing it home is work assigned to women. In some ways, it's like the reporter who asked Jesse James, "Why do you rob banks?" Jesse James replied, "Because that's where the money is." So if you're a man who wants to meet a woman, you go where women are, and the place where women are is the well. So that's the reason on a practical level.

But there may be a reason on a symbolic level too. Sometimes a well is just a well. Still, we're dealing with men meeting women at a well. A well is a dark, wet, tunnel-like space, and which gender would be symbolized by a dark, wet, tunnel-like space?

It is through a dark, wet, tunnel-like space that we are born, which just happens to be what Jesus and Nicodemus have just been talking about. Jesus tells Nicodemus to be born from above, Nicodemus expresses his surprise, and Nicodemus doesn't get any farther than that. Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that he'd like a drink, she expresses her surprise, and the two of them get into an extended conversation about his giving her living water, in which she is completely transformed, and which motivates her to

completely change her relationship with her entire community. She is reborn with a new identity, a new relationship with Jesus, and a new relationship with everyone around her.

John sets this up in direct contrast with Nicodemus, who is the one who has the most in common with Jesus, who knows Jesus the best, who is the one we'd expect to understand best what Jesus is talking about. Even Jesus himself is surprised that he doesn't, and exclaims, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" When Jesus says "those who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds will not be exposed" that doesn't sound like Nicodemus. He's one of the righteous ones. That sounds more like the Samaritan woman who is, in the old phrase, "living in sin."

However, I've been thinking lately of a point made by the theologian James Alison. He talks about the old understanding of sin, and contrasts it with the new message in the life and teaching of Jesus, which he expresses this way, "Sin ceases to be some defect which apparently excludes someone from the group of the righteous, and comes to be participation in the mechanism of expulsion" (*Faith Beyond Resentment*, 16). This is the point that makes all the difference in the world in how Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman respond to Jesus in ways that are the direct opposite of each other. Nicodemus shows up thinking he knows who Jesus is, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God" and thinking he knows who he is, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, a teacher of Israel, thinking he knows who the righteous are, and that he and Jesus are inside that group, and thinking he knows who the unrighteous are, the sinners who are outside that group and excluded from it, such as Samaritans and impure women. When Jesus tells him what he truly needs, and who Jesus truly is, he is completely flummoxed because it doesn't fit the way his world is divided up at all.

The Samaritan woman, by contrast, is acutely aware of her outsider status, and begins by stating it plainly: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria? She's right. The text tells us that Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans, and it tells us that even Jesus' disciples were astonished that he was speaking with a woman. But what happens is that Jesus refuses to participate in the mechanism of exclusion, and insists instead on doing the exact opposite: offering her more and more acceptance, as he increasingly shows that he knows her on a deep level, including the

things that have caused others to reject her. As he accepts her, Jesus also shows her who he is, on a deep level, and she increasingly shows that she sees and knows him. She goes from saying “you, a Jew” to “Sir” to “are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?” to “I see that you are a prophet” to “I know that Messiah is coming” at which point Jesus states his identity, using the words of Yahweh from the burning bush: I am. She is now transformed by his truly knowing her and her new knowledge of him, so much so that she rushes off to talk to the very people she’d been trying to avoid, the people who’d rejected and excluded her as an outsider, a sinner with a defect, and she invites them to relationship with Jesus as the one who knows her and accepts her, “come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done. He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” Because of her, they come to know Jesus and say, “we know that this is truly the savior of the world.” She has become not just a convert, but an evangelist of the good news.

As Alison points out, the way we avoid dealing with the difficult aspects of our own natures and our own lives is to put up an us-them division, and project the difficult aspects of our own natures onto the “them” and exclude the “them”. So the people who are the harshest about other people’s sexuality turn out to be the ones who have unresolved feelings about their own sexuality; the people who accuse others of being hostile turn out to be the ones who have plenty of aggression in themselves, and so on. Because of the levels of denial that are part of this process, when they are caught up in the mechanism of exclusion, they are unaware that they are doing it and they remain stuck in it; which is to say, at a deeper level of irony, when we are caught up in the mechanism of exclusion, we are unaware that we are doing it and we remain stuck in it. But what the gospel of John is doing here is making us aware that there are two different ways to respond to who Jesus is, the way of Nicodemus or the way of the Samaritan woman. Someone like the Samaritan woman who has been on the receiving end of this exclusion for so long is well aware of it, and knows what it’s like for someone to stop sacralizing the exclusion and instead turn it upside down and transform it into what sacredness truly is, its opposite: complete acceptance and love of “the other”, exactly the way she is. What is it like? It’s like never feeling thirsty again, but having a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. It’s like emerging into a new birth, being born from above.