

02-01-2026 Worship Service

Message – Pastor Lois Harder

Seen in the Sun (or Samaritan in the Sunshine) John 4:1-42

I'd like to change the title of my sermon. I didn't think of it in time, but since last week's message was called Nic at Night, I think I'd like to call this one Seen in the Sun.

Let me begin today by just doing a little compare and contrast to these two stories that we find in back-to-back chapters of the Gospel according to John - Nicodemus in chapter 3 and the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter 4.

- Nic was a well-respected and powerful man. The woman was vulnerable and disrespected.
- Nicodemus was named. The woman is just... the woman – no name. In the Bible, names are significant. If a person is un-named it's typically a sign of their perceived INsignificance.
- Nicodemus was a Pharisee, someone of high status and social value. The Samaritan woman was unmarried, quite possibly a social outcast and had very little social value.
- Nicodemus was obviously an “insider” in the world of the Jewish hierarchy and the woman was clearly an “outsider”.
- They both misunderstood Jesus initially, but the ways they responded to that misunderstanding were very different.
 - Nicodemus came to Jesus, seeking him out, secretly, to try to figure out more clearly who Jesus was. But when Jesus gave him a confounding response, telling him about the need to be born anew in order to see God's kingdom, Nic was bamboozled right away and really didn't pursue the heart of the conversation any further – at least, not that John writes about. He just got stuck on what he didn't understand.
 - The woman was approached by Jesus – she didn't seek him out. And yet she engaged Jesus fully, courageously and intelligently. She offered a curious and extended conversation with Jesus.
- In the end, it seems that Nicodemus came to a rather ambiguous faith and only demonstrated his faith in quiet, private sorts of ways. The woman's faith was ignited and she went back into the town with a bold, enthusiastic, very public declaration of her understanding of who Jesus was and her faith in him.
- And, perhaps the most obvious comparison, Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover (the secrecy) of darkness – Nic at Night. The woman's encounter with Jesus was in the brightness of the noon-day sun, out in the open for all to see and witness. She was Seen in the Sun.

As I read and listened to the commentators this week, I was reminded that this story has been misunderstood and misinterpreted for a long time. So let's see if we can set the record a little straighter – these things take time. For many years it's been assumed that this Samaritan woman was a prostitute or a woman of ill repute, that because she'd had five husbands and the man she was currently with was not her husband she must have been some kind of woman of loose

morals. But that assumption comes from seeing this story through much more contemporary lenses. David Lose writes, "...if we read more closely we discover that there is nothing in the passage that makes this an obvious interpretation. Neither John... nor Jesus... supply that information. Jesus at no point invites repentance or, for that matter, speaks of sin at all. She very easily could have been widowed or have been abandoned or divorced. Five times would be heartbreaking, but not impossible. Further, she could now be living with someone that she was dependent on, or be in what's called a Levirate marriage (where a childless woman is married to her deceased husband's brother in order to produce an heir yet is not always technically considered the brother's wife). There are any number of ways, in fact, that one might imagine this woman's story as tragic rather than scandalous."

The trouble with getting hung up on the woman's morality is that it can distract us from reading the heart, the core of the story. Her morality is not at all what this story is about.

This woman was strong, smart and savvy despite – or maybe because of her vulnerability. Although Jesus crossed LOTS of boundaries to even approach her in the first place, she did not shrink from engaging him.

She had her wits about her and she proved that she knew her own cultural and religious traditions well as she interacted with him. She was clear that Jewish men (rabbis, in particular) were not supposed to be talking to Samaritan women – especially when there was no one else was around. She knew that it didn't make any sense for Jesus to be asking her for a drink of water when he didn't even have a bucket. But she moved quickly from those very rational, logical positions to an important theological point – she pointed out that this was Jacob's well. And Jacob was their shared ancestor. That was, perhaps, the most important thing that they had in common and she cut right to the heart of it. The Judeans and the Samaritans, of course, had generations of bad blood between them. By this time, they were sworn enemies, although they had common ancestors. Even as she challenged him, this woman was offering an olive branch, being a peacemaker, creating a deep and significant connection with this bold Jewish rabbi.

They were meeting at Jacob's well. Wells are where betrothals happened in ancient Jewish stories. This very well was where Jacob had met Rachel. It was at a well that Moses met Zipporah and Isaac met Rebekah.

In John's Gospel Jesus is described as a bridegroom and God's people are described as the bride – in both Old and New Testament stories. So here we have the true bridegroom, Jesus, who is also God, meeting a woman of Samaria at Jacob's well, symbolically bringing the two feuding Jewish peoples back together.

It goes on. Prophets often describe false worship in terms that use images of a broken marriage covenant. The Samaritan woman declared Jesus to be a prophet – not because he read her palm or made futuristic predictions, but because prophets take issue with idolatry and false worship. So while Jesus questioned her about her marital status, she understood him to be talking at a much deeper level about the UNfaithful worship practices of BOTH the Judeans, the Jews in Jerusalem AND the Samaritans the Jews here, on Mt. Gerezim. Both groups were stubbornly insistent that true worship had to happen in a certain place and in a certain way. These rigid and

unchanging rules were quickly contributing to God's people being not only divided, but mortal enemies – breaking the covenant and the heart of God.

Jesus could see that the woman understood what he was trying to explain, so he went on... those who truly want to worship God will worship in spirit and in truth. The Spirit is not dependent on a particular location or a stuck and unchanging doctrine or dogma. "God is spirit and it is necessary to worship God in spirit and in truth." (verse 24)

The un-named Samaritan woman in the bright, blazing sun continued to press Jesus. "I know that the Messiah is coming, the one who is called the Christ. When he comes, he will teach everything to us." And here, Jesus knew he had her full attention and she was following him. So he said, "I Am – the one who speaks with you."

At that point the disciples finally arrived, shocked to see this culturally inappropriate exchange happening. But the Truth had been spoken and received. The fresh, living water had been granted and received. The woman and Jesus had truly seen each other. She understood his message and she had nothing to lose and everything to gain by loudly and publicly sharing it. "Come and see a man who has told me everything I've done! Could this man be the Christ?" And many Samaritans believed in Jesus because of her words.

Nicodemus didn't quite get it. The disciples didn't quite get it. The un-named, enemy Samaritan woman got it. That day she drank deeply of Jesus' living water, like a spring, bubbling up into eternal life. And she would never be thirsty again. She shared it. She invited others to come to this well, to drink this living water, to receive the Light and the Love of God through the prophet rabbi Jesus.

What's in this story for us? Here are five ideas:

- Be ready to be surprised. To worship God in Spirit and in Truth can lead to all sorts of unexpected conversations and openings for The Spirit to work.
- Be ready to really see people, to be curious and courageous, to engage people out of your own study and reflection and what you know about your own faith tradition.
- Be ready to change. Rules that never bend and ideas that are never challenged, rarely lead to new growth or understanding.
- Remember that faithfulness is in covenant with God – not with any nation or region or people group.
- Don't allow the powers that be to decide who your enemies are. Fear will leave us in the dark. Love will take us into the Light.

Resources:

Believers Church Bible Commentary: John by Willard M. Swartley

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/the-woman-at-the-well/commentary-on-john-41-42-4>

Benediction –

O God, shower us in your living water, bringing us to new life, fresh and clean. Walk with us as we share our experiences of your living water with others, to bring peace and healing in your world. We ask your blessing on the meal we're about to receive. May it nourish our bodies and our fellowship nourish our souls. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Exit this NW door for lunch.