

March 23, 2014
Third Sunday in Lent
John 4:4-42

BAPTIZED IN WATER AND THE SPIRIT

Last week we read the story of Nicodemus, the upstanding religious leader who came to Jesus at night because something was pulling him towards the strange new itinerant rabbi. Nicodemus was drawn to him even though Jesus was a countercultural upstart where Nicodemus was a pillar of the community. Jesus gave Nicodemus an earful about being born again of water and the Spirit. Jesus explained the Good News to him: that God so loved the world he sent his only Son so that the world might be saved through him.

In today's lesson, the main characters' roles are flipped. Jesus is the respected religious leader of the predominant faith tradition and the person he encounters is the outsider; an outcast in fact. And she does not come seeking him. He seeks her.

Normally, going to the well would have been part work and part social activity. The women of the village would have a set time frame when they would go to the only source of water available every morning with their large water jugs and they would spend some time socializing, sharing each others joys and sorrows, not that different from a group of women who get together once a month for lunch or dinner today.

But the woman that Jesus meets at the well is all by herself. Because of her sinful lifestyle she is shunned by everyone else in the community. For a woman to have engaged in serial relationships with multiple men was considered perverted, disgusting, and completely contrary to the laws of nature and the will of God. That standard did not apply to men of course.

But women were supposed to be married and having children with one and only one man. You really need to get what a deviant she was in the eyes of the establishment to understand how remarkable this conversation with her really is.

In addition, she is a Samaritan. Upstanding Jewish rabbis didn't associate with Samaritans. Although they worshipped the same God as the Jews, the Jews believed the Samaritans were unclean heathens. They would have preferred to avoid them altogether, but doing so would have meant adding weeks to the journey between Galilee and Jerusalem. So, when the disciples leave Jesus at the well on the edge of town, they think they are protecting their leader from overexposure to undesirables. That is why they are so surprised when they come back and find him in a serious conversation with not just an unclean Samaritan, but a woman to boot.

So, this is the situation: The now famous, highly respected rabbi, initiates a deep, spiritual conversation even though:

- A. Men, especially Rabbis, did not have theological conversations with women in public. Period.
- B. As the woman points out, Jews generally didn't speak to Samaritans if they could help it. And
- C. This woman is a flaming sinner and an outcast even among her own people.

She is the complete opposite of Nicodemus, the respected Pharisee who had a conversation with Jesus about being born of water and the Spirit. Yet, this unnamed woman has a conversation with Jesus about the living water of salvation.

Jesus asks her for a drink of water. Very much aware of the difference in their respective social status, this lady nevertheless has some

gumption. She doesn't cower in his presence. She actually sasses him—gets a little sarcastic: “Why would an upstanding dignitary such as yourself ask a lowly Samaritan woman such as myself for a drink?? In other words, get your own freakin water.

Jesus doesn't get indignant. He doesn't reprimand her. He begins to teach. And the teaching is intimate, spiritual teaching. The kind of teaching we usually hear when Jesus is alone with his disciples. Not the teaching that the first readers of John's Gospel would have expected to hear when he is speaking to one lowly, outcast, female. But that is what he does. And make no mistake about it. She becomes a disciple and the first evangelist. The first person to go out upon hearing the good news that Jesus brings and share it with others who have not yet heard it.

Jesus brings the living water to the world. The days when the people of God can exclude, marginalize and stigmatize their fellow human beings are over. There is one God and that God is the father of all people, Jews, Gentiles and Samaritans; Americans, Mexicans and Syrians. And that one God is the God who so loved the world—the whole world—he sent his only son, not to condemn the world but so that the world would be saved through him. (John 3:16-17)

That is what is amazing. That is what Christians believe. We are unconditionally loved by God. Saved from the consequences of our own failings. Saved from a life lived in darkness.

In Baptism, we are born of water and the Spirit. Recipients of the living water that comes gushing up to give eternal life. In Baptism we become a new creation. No longer are we left alone to our own devices. We are transformed into members of the Church of Jesus Christ, members of the body of Christ, joined together with all those who likewise have received

God's grace in Christ. Baptism confirms our adoption into the family of God as heirs of the covenant of grace. In Baptism Christ claims us and puts a sign and seal on us to show that we belong to God.

And so we Baptize Sarah this morning not because it is something she has to do in order to be saved. She was saved by the work of Jesus Christ two thousand years ago and not by anything she does or will do, or that we can do for her. Nor do we Baptize her to make some kind of decision for her—when she is older she will decide for herself whether she will respond to the saving grace of Jesus Christ by making a commitment to follow him. We Baptize Sarah this morning because she is a precious child of God, who now will be signed and sealed as just that. There can be nothing greater and nothing more joyful. Amen.

In Christ, our baptism is the sign and seal of our cleansing from sin, and of our being grafted into Christ. I invite John, Lisa and daughter Sarah to come forward. John, who was a member here at Fellowship is re-joining this particular congregation by reaffirmation of faith. Lisa, who also was previously Baptized is joining by public profession of faith.