

This is a long, long story, so settle in. It also contains the longest sustained conversation Jesus has with any individual in the gospels and that is part of what makes it significant.

John 4:5-42

5So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. 7A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 8(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 9The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

10Jesus answered her, "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." 11The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"

12Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" 13Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14but 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." 15The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

16Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." 17The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 18for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" 19The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet.

20Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." 21Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. 24God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

25The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." 26Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

27Just then, his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or "Why are you speaking with her?"

28 Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,
29 “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!

He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” 30 They left the city and were on their way to him.

31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” 32 But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” 33 So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?”

34 Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. 35 Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest?’ But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. 36 The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.

37 For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ 38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

39 Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” 40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. 41 And many more believed because of his word. 42 They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Last week, we heard about God loving and redeeming the entire world, not just the people of Israel, but the entire world. No exceptions

Today, we focus on Jesus’ encounter with a woman from Samaria in Samaritan territory, a foreigner in a foreign land. A territory and people that good Jews avoided, and where Samaritans also avoided Jews because of ancient animosity.

Right before this passage, the Scripture reads: 4 Now he had to go through Samaria. The word had meant must. He must go to Samaria and travel to a place outside the comforts of Jewish territory, into a land where the people disdained and dismissed the Jewish people, and vice versa.

He had to go through Samaria, not for travel’s sake, or to save time, but because it was part of his mission from God. It was not enough for the disciples to know that God loved the world in the abstract; he was making it concrete by going out into the foreign world of Samaria to demonstrate and declare God’s love for the world, for the entire world, not just the Jewish people.

They arrive at a well, and the disciples go off to purchase some food. While they are gone, Jesus engages with a woman from Samaria. Like Nicodemus last week, Jesus chooses to invest considerable time in talking with this woman.

As the conversation begins, Jesus is tired, hungry, and thirsty; it's the heat of the day, and a woman shows up to draw water. Jesus, a faithful Jew, breaks his societal constraints and asks the woman to draw him some water from the well

This is scandalous even to the woman, for she knows Jews and Samaritans don't mix. It's like a saying I grew up with, "Jews and Gentiles don't mix." My everyday experience said it was impossible not to mix with non-Jews in my world in Little Rock, Arkansas, but this proverb must have had a profound impact on me because I still remember it. Jews and Samaritans don't mix was a brain tattoo for the woman, and well known to Jesus.

Jesus uses her amazed response to his request as an opportunity to begin a conversation with her. Using the image of water, Jesus says he has living water to give her, which he understands as spiritual, and she takes it quite literally.

Then he tells her to fetch her husband, and she says, "I don't have one." It's like the old song by Peter, Paul, and Mary, which says, "Woman, woman, you've got five husbands, And the one you have now, he's not your own".

Just who was this anonymous woman with five husbands? Tradition has held that since she is there at high noon, the heat of the day, when the women ordinarily come early in the morning, to draw water when the temperature is cooler. She must be an outcast to her own people.

Many have labeled a sex worker, but there is no evidence of that; more likely, she is an unfortunate barren woman who has lost five husbands, either to death or divorce, and the man who is supposed to take her in as his wife, according to Jewish tradition, may well have refused.

Maybe she comes at noon to avoid the "looks" of the other women.

We really know little about her; we don't even know her name.

But we do know Jesus meets her where she is and for who she is and will do the same for us.

Jesus treats her as special, and because of this, she is well known throughout the ages. He engages her in a theological discussion about where to worship and tells her that the Spirit and truth of worship are more important than the location.

Jesus conversing with this woman is a sign of profound respect. He is treating her like he treats his disciples, which is remarkable for a male-dominant culture. He places her on the same level as the rest of his disciples. This reminds us that even though Scripture was composed in a male-dominated patriarchal society, women were among Jesus' disciples.

The conversation shifts to the Messiah, and Jesus replies to her statement about the Messiah with "I AM," not "I am he," as our translation puts it, but "I AM," which are the Greek words for God's Hebrew name I am—the name God gave to Moses at the burning bush. Jesus is making a cosmic declaration about himself. He reveals to her that he is the Messiah and more. He is God come into the world to be with us.

It is to this woman, this outcast, this foreigner that Jesus makes the first revelation of who he really is, not to the authorities, not to the Pharisees, not even to the disciples, but this woman. In doing so, he elevates her to great significance for the Christian faith and history.

Just then, the disciples return and know better than to ask, "Why are you talking to a woman?" Even more scandal, for an unmarried man talking to an unmarried woman without chaperones, it's just not done. They are deeply troubled by this and the fact that he is treating this woman in such a way, like one of them.

Then the woman puts down her jug and goes to the village to tell everyone what has just occurred, as she ponders, "Could this be the Messiah?"

What she experienced changed everything. Her conversation transforms and empowers her.

She rushes off to her village, while the disciples think they have all the time in the world to spread the word about Jesus, the woman knows there is an urgency. This encounter makes all the difference in the world to her.

As Karoline Lewis says, she puts down her jug, her jug of shame and isolation, and, transformed by Jesus, returns home alive and empowered for the first time in a long time. She tells people about this remarkable man she has encountered.

Many of us long for that sort of religious experience when we are free from shame, fear, and isolation, and our faith feels renewed and refreshed.

In Jesus, there is acceptance of us that allows us to set down our own jugs of shame and isolation that hold us back and keep us down. She went home and told people about her experience, and they came to check it out and then came to believe themselves.

I resonate with that.

In college, when I was a curious seeker, I was interested in religion, but more in peace, love, and justice. I had taken several religion courses, even though I was a history major. One day, Marlene said to me, "You might want to check out Jesus when you think of these issues of peace, love, and justice." I did, and there was another step on my spiritual journey and a deepening of my faith that led me to come and see Jesus, just as the villagers and the woman did. Jesus met me where I was and who I was.

Can you recall one of those times when you were invited to "check out Jesus," Who helped you significantly in your faith development? And today, why not reflect on those times and people?

Just as we have had folks help us in our faith development, we can also be those folks who help others with theirs by treating them with love and acceptance.

It turns out that these foreigners are so receptive to the woman's testimony and Jesus' words that he is compelled to stay with them for two days. Again, taking a significant amount of time to share with people who were considered "the other, the ungodly," Jesus moves these folks from them to us. No longer are they foreigners; they are part of God's people.

Just as Jesus must go to Samaria because it is God's will, we too are told by Jesus that we must invest time, love, and acceptance with other folks, even when at first glance we think they are not our kind of folks or don't belong.

Just like the woman, Jesus wants us to meet them where they are, for who they are. For Jesus, those "not our kind of folks" belong to God as well. You never know what will come of it when we engage with them. We could make all the difference in the world for ourselves and others.