

QUESTIONS

The first week of Lent we were invited to follow Christ and set out on our own wilderness journey. Last week, we saw in Abraham and Sarah at least one model of what a journey of faith looks like, a journey of trust that involves leaving things behind and embracing a future that we are not able to create for ourselves. This week, in a reading from the fourth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus and the disciples have been in and around Jerusalem and the Jordan River, and now are making their way back to Galilee. But their journey is interrupted by a detour of sorts. This text includes the longest sustained dialogue between Jesus and anyone else in the whole New Testament. If you had to guess, who do you think Jesus would engage in conversation at such length?

[Jesus] had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The 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.) Jesus 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but 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." The 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."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But 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. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just 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?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. 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."

John 4:4-29, 39-42

The disciples have been out looking for a good kosher deli where they could pick up something for lunch. Then, bringing back some bread and cheese, they turn a corner, look up and see Jesus talking to a stranger. Only it's not just any old stranger, it's a *woman*. And it's not just any woman, it's a *Samaritan* woman. Jesus—a Jewish male, a religious teacher—is having an intimate conversation with a Samaritan woman with a shady reputation in a public place.

And the disciples must be thinking to themselves: “We could spend the rest of the day sorting out all the taboos you are breaking! Don't you know just how wrong this is?”

They are perplexed and astonished. The woman at the well is just as perplexed and astonished. From both sides of this awkward encounter there are a lot of questions being raised.

And so, in lieu of a “normal” sermon, what I would like to do today is to think about some of the questions this story evokes, not only in the minds of the characters in the story, but even more in our own lives, and in the life of the church.

Maybe a good place to start is with this question:

Would you want to meet someone who claims to know everything about you?

Would that be a good thing or a bad thing? Why might that be a frightening thing to consider? Is it because there are some things in our past that we would be embarrassed by if they were exposed? Or is it because we are frightened to have anyone that close to us, that it goes beyond what we consider comfortable bounds of intimacy?

But think about how it turned out for the woman at the well. Jesus knows that she has had five husbands and the man she is living with at the time is not her husband. But does this matter to Jesus? And does it change the way he approaches her? By the end of the story she is practically bragging about how much he knows about her, and she becomes something of an evangelist, telling others in her village that she has met the Messiah. But how did she come to that conclusion? Is it because he seems to know everything about her? Or is it because he accepts her as she is and treats her with respect and dignity, even while challenging her ideas about worship and tradition? Her own journey of broken relationships has seemed to turn a corner. So is it a bad thing for Jesus to know everything about us? Or is it something to be embraced?

This story actually begins with the need of Jesus, a physical need for a drink of water. It is a need that the woman is able to fill. And he allows her to fill this need. He lets her know that he needs her just as much as she needs him. We talk a lot in the church about meeting the needs of others, and that is what we should do. But have you ever thought about how we let others find meaning and purpose in their life by meeting a need we might have? How letting others, even enabling others, to meet real needs in our lives and in our community can give them dignity? Can we maybe even restore their place in our communities?

And how would you describe this unnamed woman's testimony about Jesus to her neighbors? Is it full of certainty, or is it more like this sermon, filled with unanswered questions? Is it judgmental, or is it invitational? Can we learn anything from the way she approaches evangelism?

When Jesus and the woman are having their back and forth dialogue, they are at cross purposes because Jesus introduces a metaphor into the conversation that she is not quite ready for. She's talking about well water and literal thirst; he starts talking about “living water,” and spiritual thirst.

The “living water” he offers has something to do with what he calls “eternal life.” What does “eternal life” mean to you? Does it have to do with a place we go to after this life? Or is it possible to begin “eternal life” even now? How would that look?

What is the difference between water contained in a well, which is obtained by a bucket, and a spring of water that gushes up and probably runs all over the place?

What's the water like in our congregation? Is it contained, and is access to it under tight control? Or is it a gushing spring? How do we try to contain and control the living water we have access to? How do we control the access to living water? We know that when the water of the Winnebago River is not contained and controlled it can be dangerous. Is there something dangerous or risky about the free-flowing water of grace and mercy that Jesus offers?

Jesus says that those who drink of the water he gives will never be thirsty again. What quenches your deepest thirst? Does the water in our church satisfy deep thirst? Where do you find "living water"? In what ways do we attempt to quench our thirst, fulfill our lives—but in ways to do not really satisfy?

If you've had enough questions for a moment, let's interrupt his so-called sermon for a mention of a scene in the novel *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson. The narrator, John Ames, a pastor, is remembering walking down the street toward the church a few years earlier, and there was a young couple ahead of him.

"The sun had come up brilliantly after a heavy rain, and the trees were glistening and very wet. On some impulse, plain exuberance, I suppose, the fellow jumped up and caught hold of a branch, and a storm of luminous water came pouring down on the two of them, and they laughed and took off running, the girl sweeping water off her hair and her dress as if she were a little bit disgusted, but she wasn't. It was a beautiful thing to see, like something from a myth. I don't know why I thought of that now, except that perhaps because it is easy to believe in such moments that water is made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash. I wish I had paid more attention to it." (*Gilead*, pp. 27-28)

Can we see something of the presence of the divine, the holy, in something as ordinary as luminous drops of water shaken from a tree branch? Or something as ordinary as a cup of cool water offered when you are thirsty? Do we see that ordinary things around us everyday can be used for blessing? What ordinary things can we use to bless others? How do we use them?

Let's go back to the disciples who stumble on this encounter in progress. Why are they so astonished when they turn the corner and see Jesus talking to this woman?

Who would we be astonished to see Jesus talking to? A Muslim woman? A gay Buddhist? A drug dealer?

Are the disciples astonished because they are uncomfortable with all the barriers that are being crossed over? Are they more comfortable and at home within well-defined boundaries, where the water is contained and access is controlled?

And just how many divisions and barriers are Jesus and this woman crossing?

The religious/ethnic barrier—he's Jewish and she's Samaritan.

The gender barrier.

The barriers between ancient traditions of worship and theology and the present reality of a Messiah who comes along to cross and dismantle barriers. And a related one: the barrier between restricted and unrestricted worship.

One way of thinking about crossing barriers is to ask, what is it that gets stripped away in this encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman? What, in the end, doesn't really matter and what really does matter? And is there anything that needs to be stripped away in our own time? In the way we are a church or a denomination? In the way we practice our faith? In our worship and mission and education?

Which opens up another line of questions:

What does Jesus mean when he says that he has come to bring a time when we worship "in spirit and truth." In Eugene Peterson's paraphrase Jesus says "Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That's the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are

simply and honestly themselves before him in worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves.” This interpretation suggests that we worship in spirit and truth when we worship with authenticity and integrity, from our true self. Is that a helpful interpretation?

Maybe another way to ask this question is this: How does the true worship of God that Jesus refers to transcend the traditions of worshiping either in the Temple in Jerusalem of the Jews or on Mount Gerazim of the Samaritans? In our own time, how does worship go beyond the cultural and traditional and denominational restrictions we tend to place around it? Is the style of worship, whether “contemporary” or “traditional” (whatever those terms might mean), as important as the meaning and purpose of worship?

At the end of the story, the Samaritans accept Jesus based on the woman’s testimony and they even invite him, and I presume the disciples, to stay with them for a couple of day, guests of the village. So, just who gets converted in this story? The Samaritans? Or the disciples? If the disciples, just what are they converted to? What, or maybe *whom*, do we need to be converted to?

We started out by saying that all these questions come from an interrupted journey. Does our journey ever get interrupted? Our personal journey of faith? The extended journey of the church or this congregation? Does it need to be interrupted? What would interrupt our journey? Are there questions that stop us in our tracks? We have been looking at the journey as a metaphor for Lent—the wilderness journey, the journey of faith? But can Lent also be an interruption to our journey as we live with the questions?

So, what do you think of a so-called sermon that consists mainly of unanswered questions? Do you think it’s just a cop-out because the preacher couldn’t come up with anything better? Do you think the preacher should try harder next time and maybe focus on just one or two questions and prepare a better sermon?

While that may be a question best left unanswered, I invite your response.

Let us pray:

Lord, like many of the saints in our tradition, we come with more questions than answers. Give us peace of mind during this interruption of our journey of faith through this season of Lent. Because we know that the greatest question still awaits us, the question that gets answered by the cross. Help us to live with these questions, to dwell in uncertainty and ambiguity, relying not so much on our tentative answers as on our trust in you. Amen.