

John 4: 1-42 In Spirit and Truth

March is Women's History Month when we honor women's contributions in American history. It originated as Women's History Week in California in 1978, and the week of March 8 was chosen to match the International Women's Day, which is March 7th.

In Japan, March 3rd is celebrated as the Girls' Day: it's a day to pray for the health and happiness of young girls. Families with girls would setup a display of dolls depicting the Imperial Wedding on a stepped stage with a red carpet. But this display must be put away as soon as the day is over, because it was believed that leaving them out longer would cause a delayed marriage in the girl's future, which was traditionally regarded as a tragedy. I'm glad that the girls in Japan now continue to celebrate the Girls Day without such dreadful pressure to be married on time or be married at all.

I've never studied sociology, but I find it fascinating how, in most cultures that I know, social norms such as family structure and the roles we play in it as parents, spouses and children are, in reality, never as simple as they seem on the surface. Even when the established norms were meant for the good of the society, with the dynamics shifting in many aspects of our lives in our changing world, how we relate to our roles and with one another can be confusing.

For some people, it might feel like we're living in a different culture than the one we grew up in, or like we're standing on a shifting ground, and we long for a guiding light that steadies our steps and gives us peace and hope, as we travel this bumpy road called life, and to drink from the living water that sustains us through the journey.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus crosses the boundaries of the land, culture, religion, and social norms, to reveal the unchanging truth of who he is, to a woman. And he engages her in what is the longest running conversation he ever has with anyone in the Bible.

This woman has had 5 husbands and the one she has now is not her husband. Over the years, removed from that time and culture, the history has interpreted these details of her life with prejudice, and has labeled her as a woman with a questionable past, whose morality was all wrong. Yet, Jesus does not say anything about her sin. In those days, a woman didn't get to pick a husband or marry at will. One of the social norms in the ancient Hebrew culture was Levirate marriage that required a man to marry the widow of his brother in order to keep his family lineage going, and it also provided for the widow. 5 husbands in her life doesn't mean she lived an immoral life; it likely means she had lost 5 husbands.

Jesus's question to her was not to expose her sin but to name what she had suffered. Jesus never judged her but told her he knew what she'd gone through in life.

Now that we've cleared of any negative preconception we might have about her, let's go back to the beginning of the story. Their conversation started when Jesus asked her to give him a drink at Jacob's well. And the woman is surprised by this, because Jesus broke 2 social norms of their day: first, a Rabbi, a Jewish Teacher did not have public conversation with a woman; there was a conventional restriction. Secondly, Jews did not have contact with Samaritans.

We've heard about this hostile relationship between Jews and Samaritans elsewhere in the Bible. It's more than just not liking one's neighbor; it is a both religious and cultural division with a long history. You see, Jews and Samaritans were once one people, the Hebrews who became Israel. That's why the woman calls Jacob their ancestor.

But earlier on, the people of Israel split into the northern kingdom, with Samaria as its capital, and the southern kingdom, with Jerusalem as the center. Then Northern Kingdom succumbed to the Assyrian Empire and they lost their identity as Israel and the religious purity and they assimilated into the Assyrian culture. As Samaritans, they regarded as their Holy Scriptures the Five Books of Moses, but not the writing of the Prophets. For the Jews, the Law and the Prophets together comprised their Bible. And they both believed in the coming of the Messiah, but a fear of ritual contamination developed into a prohibition of all social interactions between Jews and Samaritans. And Jesus defied this boundary, too, by asking a woman of Samaria to give him a drink.

The woman didn't understand that Jesus, who was asking her for a drink of water which she could get, was offering her the life-giving, living, spiritual water which she could not get for herself even with a bucket. But unlike Nicodemus last week, who just said "How can these things be!?" when Jesus talked about being born from above, this woman simply asks Jesus to give her that living water.

Unlike Nicodemus, who struggled to understand, the Samaritan woman simply asked for what Jesus offered, even she didn't understand, and their conversation went deeper, and moved towards her own life. And when she saw that Jesus could see through her, in fact, he knew her life story, she figured Jesus must be a prophet. Now she was hooked.

Then she asks this question about the right place to worship God, which sounds like a random, out of the blue question to us but actually was the most pressing religious problem that

stood between Jews and Samaritan. Samaritans claimed their mountain of Gerizim was THE right place to worship God, and for Jews, it was Jerusalem. In asking this question, the woman was not changing the subject or anything; rather, she was now starting to trust Jesus as someone who knew the deeper truth. She was now opening herself to know Jesus for who he was, and she knew Jesus knew who she was. Now there was a relationship, with an openness in her heart to receive what Jesus had to tell her.

Jesus answers: God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. To say God is spirit is to say God is beyond any physical location. Whether Jews or Samaritans, the true worshippers worship God in spirit and truth. I wonder how this sounded like to the Samaritan woman who had lived up till this moment in a world that was sharply divided. I wonder how all those who fought and killed in the name of religion over the history of humankind ever since then heard this, if they heard it at all. The Christian Church, too, has split into numerous factions. And Jesus says, true worship, the worship of God in spirit in truth would make these divisions a moot point.

The woman doesn't comment on this but defers to the Messiah, saying when the Messiah comes, he would clarify all things.

Then Jesus reveals who he is to her by saying "I Am." And this is the moment of her encounter with Jesus. She moves from thinking of Jesus as a prophet to knowing Jesus for who he says he is. This is the first of Jesus's "I AM" saying in John's gospel. Later we would hear Jesus say I Am the Way and the Truth and the Life.

Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman, they both encountered Jesus. Nicodemus was a Jew, just like Jesus, but came by night, and could not simply ask Jesus for the gift of the Spirit that he could not understand. The Samaritan Woman, did not belong to the religion or the culture that Jesus belonged, but meeting Jesus in the broad daylight, asked for what Jesus was offering even when she didn't understand. Jesus met them both right where they were, offering the gift of spirit, the living, life-giving water. Likewise, God the Spirit meets us where we are, wherever we are, everywhere and invites us into the relationship with God, so that we might worship God in spirit and truth.

And if God meets us wherever we are, then it behooves us to pay attention, to notice the movement of the spirit in our lives. And we will find God not in the most impressive places of

worship, but see God's fingerprints all around us, in our relationships and in the amazing universe that is God's creation.

Jesus showed up for different people. Jesus "had to go through Samaria" because he knew to bring the light of Truth beyond Judea, into the world, was God's will, and, as he told his disciples, to do God's will, to complete the work God sent him to do in the world was his food. That's what kept him alive, until his work was finally done on the cross.

Above culture, religion, social norms and all such dynamics that shift and morph in our world, the Spirit of God is the Truth that is unchanging, no matter where we live and what time we live. We can rely on it and trust it. And the Truth that is God comes to us as Love. God's love is what flows between God and God's creation as Living Water, God's Love is the Light that came into the darkness of our world. God's Love is the firm ground on which we walk this confusing and bumpy road that is our one precious God-given life. Thanks be to God. Amen.