

“Conversations on the Way to the Cross: The Woman at the Well”

Mary Henderson Bowman

Date: February 25, 2024



Last week, we pondered a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Jew, a religious leader, highly respected in his community, a man of power and prestige, a man who, nonetheless, sought Jesus under the cover of darkness.

And this week, everything is different.

Jesus converses instead with a woman. She is unnamed. This woman is a non-Jew, a Samaritan, with no power or prestige among the Jews, no standing within her own community — a woman whom Jesus seeks during the light of day.

The story of The Woman at the Well is a familiar one to many of us, but there are aspects of the story that we can miss as modern listeners.

When the story was first told, the people of Jesus' time would have heard all kinds of warning bells going off as Jesus moves through the story. These warning bells alert them to the ways that Jesus is acting out of the norm, the ways that Jesus enters places that other Rabbis would not.

These bells would be a little like — “oh my gosh, I can't believe Jesus is doing that!”

The first warning bell goes off when we hear that Jesus had to go through Samaria on His way from Jerusalem to Galilee.

This is a warning bell because no one in Jesus' time chose to go through Samaria.

If you look at a map, the most direct way for a person to travel from Jerusalem to Galilee is indeed to go through Samaria, but no one did . . . unless they absolutely had to.

No one went that way because the journey through Samaria meant steep and perilous terrain.

The normal route for travelers was to take the easier route to the east of Samaria.¹

So . . . ff everyone else is avoiding Samaria, why did Jesus have to go through Samaria!

What is going on here?

I remember studying this passage long ago in my Greek class in seminary, and my professor explained this “having to go through Samaria” as a divine necessity.

This is not about geography.

There is a divine purpose attached to Jesus' path through Samaria.

Jesus' compulsion indicates that He is on a divine mission.

Jesus is tired and thirsty when He arrives at Jacob's well, but He is there waiting when His divine appointment appears.

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John (Volume 1)*, 147.

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As soon as she appears, more warning bells would be going off.
More — “I really can’t believe Jesus is doing this!”

It seems that the warning bell is going off for the Samaritan woman as well.
She is shocked that Jesus speaks to her since He is a Jew and she is a Samaritan.
There is typically nothing but animosity between Jews and Samaritans.
To the Jews, there was no such thing as a Good Samaritan.
No Jew wanted to interact with the abhorrent Samaritans.

And yet, Jesus crosses the religious and cultural barriers — just as He did the physical barrier of the journey.

And He crosses yet another barrier by choosing to be alone with this woman.
No respectable Rabbi would risk being alone with a woman, let alone having a conversation with her.²
We get a glimpse of this when Jesus’ disciples come back and are utterly astonished to see Jesus speaking with a woman..

And who is this woman whom Jesus has a divine appointment with?

She has come in the heat of the day to a well that is deserted except for Jesus.
As we listen in to their conversation and to her half-truths, we get a glimpse of why she is choosing to come alone in the heat of the day. It may be that the other women have set up a barrier and don’t speak with her or mistreat her at the well — or it may be that the woman herself has created a barrier built of shame that motivates her to avoid her neighbors.

As we listen in on the conversation, we hear the disconnection.
The woman talks about living water as running water.
But Jesus remind her that there is also a spiritual meaning for living water . . . it is the need of our souls when we thirst for God.
It is the need we have when we are restless and can only find our rest in God.

Then all of a sudden . . . Jesus changes the subject of the conversation.
And the subject becomes the woman herself.
It is as if Jesus gently holds up a mirror and asks the woman to take a look at herself.

You see, a conversation about living water is all well and good in the abstract, but Jesus is bringing the conversation to a personal level.
Our first song this morning³ spoke of Jesus’ ability to look beyond our faults and to see our need.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of John (Volume 1)*, 151.

³ He Looked Beyond My Faults and Saw My Need | Praise and Harmony Singers

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This is that moment for the Woman at the Well.

And who in this woman’s life has ever heard her story and not condemned her?

We do not know if the loss of her five husbands have been through divorce or death or both, but we can only imagine the loss upon loss, the pain upon pain, the rejection upon rejection and the grief upon grief.

Who in this woman’s life has met her in her pain and rejection and not condemned her?

Who in our own lives can extend such love?

A final bell goes off . . . the startling admission that Jesus is the Messiah.

And it speaks volumes that Jesus would choose to share this revelation with an unnamed, Samaritan woman of questionable character.

Jesus sees beyond her faults and see her need.

Jesus pursued her, but not to condemn her.

He did not come to condemn the world, but to save it.

And suddenly, everything is different.

The woman who knew barriers goes flying off to share her wonder with the very people she has been avoiding for years.

And the townspeople — perhaps filled with curiosity — responded to her and come and spend time with Jesus — and, quite remarkably, they declare Him to be the Savior of the World.

This, my friends, is no small recognition.

They have come to understand what Jesus shared with Nicodemus . . . that God so loved the world, that God sent the Son to save it and not to condemn it, that the Son came to break down barriers and to bring love.

For God so loved the world . . .