

3 Lent
March 12, 2023

Sermon by Rev. Jerry LiaBraaten

BEYOND BELIEF

Based on Jesus' Encounter with the Samaritan Woman

I'd like to begin by asking two questions: The first question is this: Why do we come here? Whether you are here in person or online, why have *you* come? In short, why do people go to church? The second question is this: What's the difference between loving someone and falling in love with someone? Please take a moment to answer these questions for yourself.

The stage is set! It's a barren one, the landscape is dry and desert-like with only one thing capturing our attention at center stage. It's a well. But not just any well. It's Jacob's well, located just outside of the village of Sychar...modern day Shechem some 30 miles north of Jerusalem. It's the well the patriarch Jacob dug, the well he and his family drank from generations before, the well from which he drew water for his flocks. The well he passed on to his children and his children's children.

There, sitting by the well is a man. Since we know the story, we know it's Jesus. Then, entering stage left is a woman. A single, Samaritan woman. So...a man... a woman. Something going to happen. Don't know what, but something.

Jesus begins the conversation with her simply asking for a drink of water. Before doing so, she poses a question, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink of water from me, a Samaritan woman?" Seems innocent enough, doesn't it? Oh, but it's not...and where it leads ends in Jesus revealing something about himself that lies at the very heart of John's gospel...the first of the great "I am.." statements. With the woman's words we discover not one, but two stages have been set...a physical, geographical one and a second, spiritual one.

We can look at today's reading as if it's part of a three-act play entitled, "Oh, the Irony of It All!" Looking more closely we discover we're not watching Act One. No, that came in the previous chapter of John. Act One is the story of Nicodemus meeting with Jesus under the cover of darkness...Nicodemus, one of the most respected men and spiritual teachers in all of Jerusalem--but one clearly worried about his reputation--doesn't get what Jesus means by, "You must be born again." He asks, "How can this be?!" Even Jesus notes the irony of this one!

Act Two, with the opening scene taking place there at Jacob's well, is where we pick up the story line. Something is odd, though. It's the middle of the day, the hottest time. Why does the woman come to the well now? Why not early in the morning or late in the day. Ah, she couldn't. But why? Is she some kind of an outcast? Yes, it must be! She doesn't want to see anyone. She doesn't want to be seen *by* anyone. But why?

A conversation ensues. A surprisingly substantive one at that! One of the first surprises we discover is that she's been married no less than five times and she's now living with a man who is not her husband. And Jesus knows this how?. Hmm. The plot thickens.

But before we go further there's something crucial we need to know about this woman.

One day, I was sitting in a seminary class and, while the professor was lecturing, there was a knock on the door. The secretary to the president asked to speak with a friend and fellow student from Namibia. He left with her. When he returned in a half-hour he was looking rather shell shocked. I learned later that he'd received a call from his family in Namibia that his older brother, the eldest, had died unexpectedly--and that the deceased man's wife and three children were now his responsibility.

A similar practice, called a levirate marriage, was in place in Jesus' time. If an older son was married and then died, the son next in line was to take her and any children into his home. Since life expectancy was much shorter in those times, it's entirely within the realm of possibility that something like this happened to the Samaritan woman. Further, in that day and culture a man could legally divorce his wife by simply presenting her with a letter of dismissal. She, on the other hand, could not file for divorce under any circumstances. And, she had no recourse if her husband did. So, here in Act Two, we listen in on a conversation between a woman who has little if anything to lose and a man who makes all things possible.

Next up: Act Three. As if it's time for a bit of levity in the play, gospel-writer (a.k.a. playwright) John has the disciples enter the stage...and the conversation. They're returning from town where they picked up some fast food. The look of astonishment on their faces says it all. Confused, hey want to ask Jesus, "What do you want?" (short and obtuse language for "What's going on here, boss?") and "Why are you speaking to her...(when you know it's against the rules?!")

It would be nice, and charitable--and better for the disciples--if we could simply write them off at this point as being clueless. But that's simply not the case. What they were was the product of their cultures, both religious and secular...products of what they'd been taught to believe about their religious rivals, the Samaritans, and a woman's place in public. Imagine cultural values and mores so powerful that even Jesus couldn't dislodge them. Oh, the irony of it all.

If we step back and look at these three...Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and the disciples...we see certain similarities. One is this: All three ask pressing questions of Jesus. Nicodemus asks, "How can this be?" The disciples ask, "Why are you talking with her?" The Samaritan woman asks, "Can this be the Messiah?" And their questions reveal another similarity among them: Jesus brings all three to the very edge of their beliefs. He brings them to questions, the answers of which will take them over that edge...answers that will lead them beyond belief, so to speak, beyond their deep-seated, and therefore deeply-held beliefs. One thing we know about this Jesus, here and elsewhere in the Bible, is that he challenges culturally-infused and life-constricting values every chance he gets. And he leads his listeners into new territory, into new, evolving and expanding ways of understanding God and the world they--the world we--live in.

What does all this mean for us? Two things come to mind. One: Jesus takes us to the brink of our beliefs and then says, "Follow me." Trust me. Come with me." And that in doing so we grow. Let me be more specific. When it comes to Bible stories like Noah's Ark, the crossing of the Red Sea, the virgin birth of Jesus and his miracles you and I were likely taught to understand these literally when we were little children. Jesus asks, are we still there in our beliefs...or might we understand them more broadly, more deeply...more metaphorically. What might they mean if we do? What matters, after all, is the significance of the story, isn't it? This is what leads us to the brink of our faith...and beyond.

The second thing this may mean is this: For the Jews and Samaritans of Jesus' day, this idea that true experience and worship of God happens within each of us was a truly radical--and obviously in some cases--incomprehensible thought. And for a very good reason: For ages--since the days when the Ten Commandments were placed in the Arc of the Covenant and then carried for 40 years during the wilderness wanderings of Moses and the Israelites--the Jews had been taught that God resided in the Arc, not in themselves. Once the temple was built and established in Jerusalem...long before Jesus' time...Jews believed that temple was *the* place where God resided--and was to be experienced and worshiped.

But Jesus told the Samaritan woman that this was changing. From now on people would experience and worship God "in spirit and in truth," ...in one's heart and mind. Not in some place to which you must "go"--and do so only occasionally at that--but in one's own being. Be it St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church, online or wherever we come to worship, these external places--as dear to us as they may be--exist for the sole purpose of supporting our growth in faith and service.

In the final scene of our three act play we're told that the townspeople believed "in" Jesus. Just what does that mean?

Reverend Renee and I have three grandsons. We call them our grandboys. And they *love* their Mimi (Renee). If I zoom call their parents about something, they'll usually pop in and say, "Hi Baboo...where's Mimi?" I'll say something like, "Oh, she's here somewhere. I'll get her." They'll wait just a moment, then say, "Baboo, when's Mimi coming?" I'll say something like, "She's coming. She's coming," but if that doesn't happen asap they'll cut right to the chase with..."Baboo?...Mimi!"

You see, they don't just love her. They *believe* in her. That's different. This is why I asked the question about loving someone and falling in love with someone. It's the closest analogy I can come up with for what it means to believe "in" someone. We can "love" someone without it having a huge affect upon us personally. But if we fall in love it changes us. We become different people...and people notice, don't they? When we believe "in" someone the same thing happens. It changes us. People notice that, too. Believing "in Jesus Christ, changes us as individuals...and as communities. That's the purpose of faith.

In the finale of this play I picture the Samaritan woman (this once nameless outcast) now leading the crowd of townspeople onto the stage and up, front and center, to Jesus. And then the townspeople do

that mosh pit thing where they raise Jesus up over their heads, pass him among themselves and then carry him home.

Of course, the curtain call comes next. There, typically, those actors with single lines the bit parts come out first. In this case, choosing from Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and the disciples, who would it be? Well, it would be the disciples. Next...Nicodemus. And finally, with a standing ovation from the audience, the true lead...the Samaritan woman. How ironic is that!

There's just one more thing. After an exceptionally good play or musical or concert, we'll hear people whooping and hollering and carrying on. Some will shout, "Bravo!" or "Bravissimo!" or even "Encore!" The world we live in today is a world that is waiting, begging for an encore to this story. And guess what? You? Me? Us?

We're it.

Amen