

May the words of my mouth.....

Last Sunday we heard a private, middle-of-the-night conversation between Jesus and the Pharisee, Nicodemus.

Jesus had turned Nicodemus’ view of life on its head when they talked about needing to be “born again”.

Today, we heard about the woman at the well. Another story found only in the Gospel of John.

This is one of my most favorite Gospel stories. It reveals a perspective of Jesus that we very rarely get to see.

We listened in on a private conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. A rare, intimate moment. Not some random, chance encounter, but one led by the Holy Spirit.

This took place in Samaria; a land populated by a mixed race of people – distant, alienated relations of the Jews.

Both the Samaritans and the Jewish people were descendants of Jacob. Both had spent many years in captivity but under different kingdoms. And while the Jews managed to remain ethnically pure for the most part, the Samaritans had intermarried and merged parts of their religion with the traditions and gods of their captors.

The Jews hated that the Samaritans continued to make any claims to their mutual heritage from Jacob.

The Samaritans had given up that right as far as the Jews were concerned. For them to continue making such claims was a sacrilege. To the Jews, the Samaritans were no better than dogs under the table.

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For Jesus and his friends, to get from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, their shortest route was *through* Samaria.

They could have taken a much longer route and avoided Samaria – but Jesus had chosen to take this one.

Jesus and his followers had been traveling through some of the most beautiful fields and orchards in that region and as they arrived in the village of Sy·char, he sent them off to buy provisions for their evening meal. Jesus then walked out of the village a short way to Jacob's Well, where he had taken off his sandals and was resting his tired feet.

Enter the Samaritan woman. The author of John does not give us her name, but in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, she is revered as St. Photine, the “luminous” one.

As always, she waited until the noon hour, when everyone else was indoors escaping the heat of the sun, to come to the well and draw her water. The rest of the village women had come to the well *many* hours earlier, back before breakfast, to draw their water, to gossip, to laugh, to share their stories from the evening before.

Photine did not fit in with the other women, and she would rather have not been smirked at, made the butt of their sordid taunts. To be snubbed. She would rather come when it was quiet, and peaceful – and no drama.

As she approached the well, she saw a man, clearly a Jew by his garments and hair, sitting on the cover of the well.

She was disappointed to see him there, having hoped that she might be alone and unbothered. But she was also mildly intrigued.

As she drew closer, she began to rattle her water jar and ladle from a short distance, so as not to startle the man. She was already anticipating some sort of confrontation since he was a Jew who didn't belong in her village.

The man opened his eyes and for a moment their gazes met and held.

And then Jesus said, “woman, give me a drink”.

In those five words Jesus invited this Samaritan woman into a conversation which would change her life forever. Turn her world as she knew it upside down.

She knew that her life had not been a particularly virtuous one. She had, for various reasons over the years, engaged in a number of unhealthy relationships, and she had long ago alienated herself from just about everyone she knew.

She chose not to talk with the other women. And if she knew what was good for her, she shouldn't talk with the men of her village – or with this man either.

She had few friends. Yet she was strong – and undaunted.

What did she have to lose by talking to Him?

We don't know what it was that Jesus saw in this woman that led Him to enter into this exchange. Perhaps it was her boldness, her ability to look into his eyes without flinching.

Maybe it was the fine lines etched on her face which told of many years struggling with life and with people.

Maybe it was her courage to challenge him with her beliefs and convictions.

We don't know what it was that she first saw in Jesus either. What caused her eyes to open to who this man was with whom she was speaking.

What was it that excited her enough to leave her jar behind and run back to the village to call together the people, to tell them what she had just experienced?

What was it about Jesus that had lit a fire in her heart, and made it dance?

With her passionate words to her neighbors, she became the first person to begin spreading the news of Jesus. A woman – a sinful woman. A Samaritan woman – not a Jew.

Jesus had disoriented her by proclaiming himself as having living water; by reciting the shortcomings and challenges of her past. Jesus read her story like a book.

Everything she had once believed about how the world worked, everything she thought she needed in life, had suddenly been flipped on her.

When Peter and the other disciples arrived back with their purchases, they were visibly unsettled by the scene they stumbled upon. I imagine many of them wanted to ask Jesus what he thought he was doing.

Jesus was going to embarrass them and bring dishonor upon Himself and upon them, too.

I expect that each desperately wanted one of the others to step forward and be the first to challenge their teacher.

I would love to have heard the long conversations between Jesus and the villagers as he spent the next two days dining and taking his rest among them. What did he teach them? What stories did he tell? What did he say that had won their hearts?

And what did his disciples feel as their Master engaged fully with these Samaritans? Not just with the woman at the well. Not just for an evening meal, but for two days.

Jesus was violating all the rules the Jews had about Samaritans. What message was Jesus giving them?

How about that God doesn't belong exclusively to only one religious group? Or, that Jesus didn't come here to live and preach only among the Jews. Perhaps the message is that God loves each and every one of us – without judgment, and unconditionally.

That we are each invited to enter into our own intense conversations with him at any time.

To have a relationship with our Redeemer; a deep, open, joyful relationship with no limits to where it may go.

Maybe that Jesus looked beyond ethnicity, beyond culture or tradition, beyond gender or lifestyle – and that maybe we should too.

What are our taboos? What boundaries have we set for ourselves?

Would *Jesus* respect those boundaries? Or would he look for an opening, any opportunity to cross those boundaries, to dissolve those artificial walls we all tend to build up between ourselves and those who might be – “different”?

We never know where a chance conversation might lead. What opportunities may be behind the next words or phrases we hear.

The Holy Spirit does speak through us at times. Words of wisdom sometimes come out of our mouths when we least expect them. Sometimes, the light just doesn't come on until a bit later, a few miles down the road.

Jesus challenges us constantly. That can be difficult because it calls each of us to be uncomfortable.

To get off our comfy sofas and be his hands and feet out in the world.

Who do you think our Samaritans might be?