

In order to look at the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman we need to contrast it with what the encounter we had last week - Jesus and Nicodemus. That one was in John 3, and this one is in John 4, and there's very little in between. I think we are meant to contrast the two stories.

What time of day does Nicodemus meet with Jesus? At night. What time of day does Jesus meet with this woman? Noon. Nicodemus comes to Jesus and it appears as if it is a secret meeting. Nicodemus didn't want others to know about it. But the meeting with the woman takes place at a well, a very public place.

Nicodemus is a Jew. The Samaritan woman was a foreigner - a Samaritan. Interestingly Jews and Samaritans are blood relatives but they hated each other. We see some of the reasons for that come up in our gospel reading.

Nicodemus was a man. The Samaritan woman was obviously a woman.

Nicodemus was well educated and a leader. The woman was not.

Based just on these facts we would assume that Jesus and Nicodemus would get along great with each other. You could picture them sitting on Nicodemus' back deck as the sun sets and they're enjoying a beer together. They talk some theology, some politics, and some college basketball.

And based on these facts we'd assume Jesus and the woman wouldn't hit it off at all. She was an uneducated female outsider. The only thing you'd expect she and Jesus to have in common was mutual hatred. When they'd encounter each other at best they would ignore each other. At worst they'd spit on each other. As for getting along and sharing a conversation, now that's a real laugh!

But we know that Nicodemus and Jesus do not work out so well together. Jesus and this unnamed woman have a totally different experience.

At the root of it is that Nicodemus came with his education and knowledge - and while he may have considered himself open-minded, we discover that he is not. The woman is ignorant, and she knows it; and thus she is open to new things.

The story unfolds with many ironic and playful twists. The encounter begins with Jesus asking her for a drink of water. She says the obvious, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Our gospel writer reminds us: Jews and Samaritans don't get along!

Jesus replies, "If you knew the gift of God," which is a double meaning. 'Gift of God' also means the Torah, or the name of the first five books of the Bible - Genesis through Deuteronomy. Both Jews and Samaritans held them to be scripture. So Jesus hints, "If you knew 'Torah', 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."

Of course this statement makes perfect sense on a spiritual level, but total nonsense at a literal level. The woman points that out, probably sarcastically, "Sir, you have no bucket... the well is deep. Where are you going to get 'living water'?" And she goes on, "You think you're greater than Jacob who gave us the well?" Notice how she is teasing him, and he is teasing back.

The answer is ironic. Yes, indeed Jesus is greater than Jacob! They keep missing each other in conversation, yet the conversation continues. Compare it to last week where Jesus and Nicodemus couldn't seem to be on the same page to save their lives. The difference here is that the woman continues to stay open to new things, new visions of God and what God is up to.

She replies again, and again missing Jesus' meaning and seeing a literal answer. When Jesus says, "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." She replies, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Once again this is a silly response, but it speaks to one profound difference between this woman and Nicodemus. At this point the woman neither recognizes Jesus full identity nor the fullness of his gifts, but she recognizes that he has something she wants, or needs. She is open and willing to receive from him. Nicodemus never does.

We have limited time for our sermon and this is a long complex story, so we're going to skip a lot. There's one key thing we have to turn to, but before we get to that, I want to make some comments about what happens next. No interpretation of this text is correct if we get this next part wrong.

For centuries people have heard that this woman had five husbands and the current man she is with is not her husband. And they've taken the fact that she is alone. And they've taken the fact that she is drawing water in the heat of the day (rather than in the morning when most women drew water), to mean that this woman is... shall we call her a woman of ill-repute. I'll admit that almost all old interpretations of this text and most of the current ones take this view. But I think they are all wrong. And by being wrong they skew the meaning of the whole conversation. Look carefully and don't let your imaginations add details that aren't there. Nowhere does the text say there is anything wrong or unacceptable about her. Nowhere does Jesus criticize her. Nowhere does Jesus say, "Go and sin no more." As for five husbands, given the laws governing marriage at the time, she may not have had any choice. A woman had no say in who she married. And if her first husband died the law dictated that she must marry his brother and no one

else. If he didn't want her or couldn't have her - say for the "silly" complication of already being married - she was out of luck. Yet she needed a man to survive. Think of her situation in terms of elderly people today who's spouses have died, and they'd love to marry each other but they can't because they'd lose Social Security benefits.

A few biblical scholars have the courage to buck the trend in interpreting this text, and I am among them. And the text actually suggests she is a quite well respected woman. What happens when she goes back to tell everyone about Jesus? Do they say, "Well, is that number 7 that she's decided to shack up with? I've lost count there's been so many." No, they hear her and they come to meet Jesus.

That brings us to our final point for this encounter. The gospel of John does a very interesting thing as it describes evangelism. We usually think of sharing the good news of Jesus as something that you do when you are of mature faith and you know all about Jesus. In John's gospel that's reversed. Usually the first thing people do is share the good news even when they don't know what they're talking about!

This woman goes back to her village, rouses the residents and says, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" The residents come out, they meet with Jesus, and they believe.

Do you see how intellectual understanding of God and Jesus does not necessarily coincide with the basics of faith? The root of Christian faith is not intellect. It is not understanding God. The root of Christian faith is not even belief. It is recognition of need.

The woman recognizes that Jesus has something she wants and needs, and so she comes to believe. Nicodemus seems to like Jesus and want to do nice things for him, but he does not think he needs Jesus.

When you find yourself struggling to believe, or when life makes no sense, remember the woman at the well. She reminds us that faith is built on need. When you recognize that you need God, everything else comes into place. Amen

