

Nasty Woman!
John 4:5-42

A sermon by Meighan Pritchard
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Let's say that, like the Samaritan woman, you are out running errands and you meet the Messiah—you know, as you do. And let's say you could ask the Messiah one question. What would be the most burning question you would want to ask? [Input.]

For the Samaritan woman at the well, the most burning question is about right worship, which is at the core of what keeps the Samaritans and the Jews enemies. The Samaritans worship on their mountain, and the Jews say no, no, no, everyone must worship down south in Jerusalem. Who is right?

How do we worship God compared to how other children of God worship? Is there one right way? Who has the right answer, and what do they get to do to all the others who are wrong? Can we imagine anyone asking these questions today? “We've got God all figured out over here, and the rest of you are going to hell.” It's actually a pretty important question throughout the ages, and plenty of people have died for it. So hold onto that thought, because we're going to come back to it.

I'm going to open up three areas to explore in this story, and that's the first one: What is the right way to worship?

I've heard this story since forever, but what I love about these stories is that you can read them anew and find something you hadn't noticed before. This time what struck me was the mention of Jacob's well in this story.

Why put that detail in there? Is it important that this is not just any well, but Jacob's well? And we find out a bunch of things about it. This well is near the Samaritan city of Sychar, and it is near the plot of land that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. The Samaritan woman talks about "our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it."

Well, the Samaritans' ancestor Jacob is also the Jews' ancestor Jacob. And Jacob's sons are the founders of the 12 tribes of Israel. Calling attention to this well as Jacob's well hearkens back to a time before the Samaritans and Jews were separate peoples. It is a reminder that the Samaritans and the Jews share a common ancestry. They are family. This same well has been providing water for the people and the flocks all these centuries.

So now we have two questions to explore: What is the right way to worship? And what is the significance of this well being Jacob's well? Because we haven't fully answered that question.

Here's the third topic to explore: When you realize you're talking to the Messiah, and that no one else in town even knows that the Messiah is here, what do you do?

If you're one of the disciples, you take a very, very long time to catch on. The disciples know that Jesus is different, special, a man of God. But they don't really "get" him or know what to do about him except to keep following and learning. In the Gospel of John, as I have said in other sermons, it's kind of the story of Jesus and the Twelve Stooges. They are always understanding on a literal level what Jesus is saying on a spiritual level, and we see an example of that in this story.

They've gone off to town in search of something to eat, and when they come back, they find Jesus talking to this Samaritan woman. They know that Jesus doesn't follow the usual societal rules, such as that men and women don't talk to each other outside of family groups, and Jews and

Samaritans don't talk to each other at all. And the disciples know better than to ask her, "What do *you* want?" or to say to him, "Why are you speaking with *her*?" But when they try to get him to eat something and he says, "I have food to eat that you do not know about,"—well, honestly, I would be right there with them, thinking, "Okay, that would have saved us a trip to town." And you see the disciples saying to each other, "What food is this? Did *you* give him something to eat?"

So the disciples' reaction to hanging out in the presence of the Messiah is to take him literally at every step and not catch on that he's almost always talking on a metaphorical, spiritual plane. If you want a biblical reference for taking the Bible seriously and spiritually but not literally, this is a prime example.

The Samaritan woman starts out taking Jesus literally and perhaps even cynically. When he starts spouting off—so to speak—about living water, you can almost see the hand on her hip. She says, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" And you can hear that in her head the answer is, "I don't think so!"

Only when Jesus tells her that she has had five husbands but is not married to the fellow she lives with now does the woman figure out that he is something special. You can bet that this oft-married-but-now-not status means the woman does not have much social standing in her city. She might be considered a "nasty woman," someone that decent women and men shun. The other clue for that is her coming alone at noon to draw water at the well. All the women have to draw water every day, and in that climate they would come together early in the day. This woman comes later and alone. And yet, the first thing she does when she figures out that Jesus just might be the Messiah is to leave her jar and hustle back to town to tell everyone "Come and see." This invitation "Come and see" crops up multiple times in this gospel. This time it

comes from a nasty woman, inviting the very community that has labeled her a nasty woman, to come and experience the living water.

That's a sharp contrast to the disciples. They keep stumbling along with their literal questions. She figures out just enough to know Jesus is something special, and she takes action. She goes and tells everyone she knows and brings them back out with her. This is not a nasty woman. This is a can-do woman.

Which I think explains what Jesus says to the disciples in the meantime. He starts talking about four months until the harvest, but actually the harvest is ready now for the reapers. And again, he is, of course, talking on a spiritual level. The harvest is all the children of God, whether they are Samaritans or Jews or anyone else. The seeds were sown by Jacob and all those who came before and after him—seeds of desire to be in relationship with God, seeds of trying to figure out a meaningful way to worship God. The harvest is about going and letting hungry people know that the living water and the bread of life are on the table; come and see for yourselves.

At the end of this reading, the Samaritans say to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." There's your harvest, right there: people who have heard the good news and understood what it means for them. And when they say that Jesus is the Savior of the world, I don't think they're talking about a cross and resurrection. I think they're talking about someone who has shown them the way to be in right relationship with God.

We started off with three questions:

1. What is the right way to worship?
2. What is the significance of the well being Jacob's well?
3. After you meet the Messiah, what do you do?

Jesus answers the Samaritan woman's question about right worship by saying, God doesn't care *where* you worship. God cares that you worship in spirit and in truth. Bring your whole self, body and soul, to the relationship.

And the significance of Jacob's well is the reminder that we are all God's children, all related. God doesn't care if you are a nasty woman or a Samaritan or a high-ranking Pharisee, like Nicodemus from last week. Bring your whole self.

And when you have encountered the Messiah, drunk the living water and eaten the bread of life, go and invite everyone you can to do the same.

What I love about this story is that all the truths in it are still true. God doesn't care if you are a Christian or Jew or Muslim or Sikh or Hindu or atheist. God doesn't care if you are black or white or striped, straight or gay, single or married, young or old, rich or poor. Bring your whole self, in spirit and in truth, whenever and wherever, and be in relationship with this loving, life-giving God.

We won't all understand God in the same way. That's okay. But if we are following Jesus' model, we will understand that God works through foreigners, as Jesus was in this story. God works through nasty women; stumbling, bumbling disciples; real water at real wells and living water that slakes the soul. When we talk about building walls, turning refugees away at the border, refusing to share our abundant blessings with those fleeing war and terrorism, we are not talking about the way of Jesus. The way of Jesus says we are all family. If we go back far enough in the family tree, we are all related. And we are all children of God.

The Church Council of Greater Seattle knows this, too. When protestors showed up outside the mosque by Northgate a few weeks ago, Michael Ramos, director of the Church Council, showed up, too, along with others, to offer support to the Muslims. The Church Council of Greater Seattle is training congregations how to be sanctuary churches for those trying to get their immigration status cleared up. We are looking at ways

in which we might coordinate with other churches around us to help in this effort, not by housing people directly but by offering support.

In our White Privilege Lenten study group, we are exploring what it means to recognize boundaries and live beyond them. How do we own our own status and privilege, whatever it may be, and reach out to others who have different status and privilege?

We may not have all the answers about God. Sometimes the journey is more about standing at the well with Jesus and wrestling with important questions. But we know enough about God to go out and invite people to “come and see.” We know that our God loves all of God’s children, all of creation, and that we are called to do so as well, nasty women and foreigners and all.

Jesus waits at the well for us to come with our jars. Come and see. Drink the living water. Eat the bread of life. Talk with those who are different from you. Worship in spirit and in truth. And share the invitation with everyone. Amen.