

2023.03.12 SERMON Third Sunday of Lent ©Gyllian Davies†

The gospel we heard this morning is in code - did you realize that? Of course it wasn't in code for John's followers in the first century, nor for those who were around Jesus. They knew the shorthand. Just like we have our own shorthand in our time - we all know what it means if someone says, "It was a Don Cherry moment." Or "that person has a Jekyll and Hyde personality". We all know when someone speaks of the maple leaf it's much more than a leaf on a tree. And if someone references the 'Me too' movement - we get it. Would people from fifty years ago? Or a hundred? Or how about a hundred years into the future?

So what was the communal shorthand that was used back then? What have we been missing? First of all, when we ask these questions, our answers will depend on who responds. Traditionally, scholars have taken for granted that the woman having five husbands was literal. Please note that most of those scholars were men. They would have pointed out that women don't usually go to the well in the middle of the day - it's way too hot. The best times to go are early morning and after sundown when things are cooler. Then it's not so hard to carry those heavy containers home. They would have surmised that she didn't go to the well with the other women because she was ostracized for her loose morals. But what if instead we surmise that perhaps she was *really, really thirsty*... Thirsty for what, we might wonder... We might go even further and think about our own thirst - what are *we* thirsty for?

The scholars also would point out that for a woman to even speak with a strange man, someone outside her community was never, never done. She could have been stoned for that. If things were normal she would have left as quickly as she could rather than speak to him. And... for a Jewish man, one of 'The Chosen' to speak with a Samaritan, 'The Rejected People'? Never happen. We don't have to ask why Jesus was speaking to her - we already know he breaks all the rules. But we definitely want to ask lots of why questions - why Samaria? Why noon? Why the well? Some scholars point out that for Jesus to argue with her was a mark of respect - rabbis only argue with someone who they take seriously. Do you begin to see all the layers of meaning here?

Let's turn to the conversation, the words recorded for us to hear, thousands of years later. And let's hear them decoded by a woman scholar who writes of the job saying:

[quote from Written That You Might Believe; Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, Sandra M Schneiders, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999, pg 137, first paragraph of 2nd section] Well let's give the woman some room here!

Don't get *me* started on that! For example, take our liturgical language for God. It's dominated by masculine pronouns. Of course the dominant part of any culture defines the history, the winners gets to decide how the story will be told. I hope we all know that. Consider how our liturgy genders God as masculine. This has driven hosts of women away from the church. They could no longer tolerate feeling invisible in their own church. The linguistic sexism embedded in our traditional liturgies was more than they could take. As was the refusal of many to acknowledge this exclusion of half the human race. Do we need these women here with us? You bet we do! Imagine this church filled every Sunday with women with their partners who all felt

themselves seen and valued here... So what do we do about this? We change our practices to align with our beliefs, our beliefs that women are fully as intelligent and worthy as men. We change our language for God to include men AND women. We use gender-neutral words - there's so many to choose from. And then, with our new inclusive language we hope to welcome women and their friends and loved ones back among us.

As we ponder on that let's return to the decoding of our Gospel or at least to decoding some parts of it.. Meanwhile, back in Samaria...

First, let us understand that the Samaritan woman is not an individual, but rather a representative of the Samaritan people. The story tells us how the Samaritans came to be included in the Johannine community, part of the new tribe of Jesus, the Christ. It begins with the woman wanting to know what Jesus is doing, breaking with Jewish tradition - by speaking in public with a woman, and by he, a Jew, asking her, a Samaritan, for water. Jews don't consort with Samaritans. As the conversation unfolds she decides that if he is offering living water, it means he is equivalent to Jacob, the great prophet. She challenges him - is that really what he's claiming? This matters because the Samaritan tradition does not say the Messiah will be someone from the line of David. Instead it says the Messiah will come from the prophets. Now she is beginning to wonder - is this the Messiah? So she tests him. "My people, she prods him, "say the ultimate place of worship is on the mountain here where we are, but you Jews says it is Jerusalem - what do you say to that?"

Jesus answers her that neither of those places are it, that actually people will worship in spirit and truth, not in any specific place. At that moment she recognizes him as the Messiah. He has transcended the centuries old divisions. She hears the ring of TRUTH as he speaks. And, the clincher - when asked he identifies himself as the great I AM, a word for God used particularly by the Samaritans.

Oh, and the five husbands? Those are the false Gods of five foreign tribes that the Samaritans have adopted, turning their backs on the true God, the great I AM. And the husband she does not have? The Samaritans have abandoned their covenantal relationship with God. You remember the covenant - the one God writes on their hearts, that he will be their God and they will be his people? Isn't that our covenant too? And when we are thirsty, isn't that what Jesus wants us to remember? So bring your thirst to Jesus. And if you're not sure exactly what your deep thirst is, well that question is also one to bring to Jesus. Or to God. Or to the Holy Spirit. Because whichever aspect of the great Trinity touches you most deeply - that's where your heart can find nourishment. So first we figure out our own thirst. What are we really really thirsty for? Thirsty enough to come to the well at the hottest time of the day. And then you and I and all of us can turn to our wider community and ask - what is the world thirsty for? And finally, we get to turn back here to our centre and figure out how we can make that living water available to anyone in need. Because remember what Jesus says:

*"those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.*

*The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."*

Amen.