

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, March 19, 2017 // Lent 3, Year A

The Gospel: John 4:5-42

Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, 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." The woman said to him, "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?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said 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."

Background and general observations

The familiar story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is rich in symbolism and ties together several emerging themes. In order to appreciate this passage, it is important to put it in context. For example, this story about a Samaritan woman in chapter 4 of John's gospel follows immediately the story of Nicodemus, a leader of the Pharisees, in the preceding chapter. It seems we are meant to contrast these two characters: one a man, the other a woman; one a Jew, the other a Pharisee; one with a name and prominent position in the Jewish establishment, the other nameless and despised by the religious establishment; one who comes to Jesus "by night," and the other who comes to Jesus at noon, in the full light of day.

Notice not only the contrasts but the similarities between Nicodemus and the anonymous (though somehow thoroughly known to Jesus) Samaritan woman. With Nicodemus, Jesus insists that no one can see the kingdom of God unless he or she is "born again" or "born from above." Nicodemus seems stuck on a literal level with Jesus and so does not understand. "How can anyone be born, after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb, and be born?" Jesus responds that one must be "born of water and the Spirit," in order to enter the kingdom of God, thus setting up the controversy that concludes chapter 3, the controversy about Jesus' disciples baptizing more disciples than John, and introducing the theme of water that plays out here in chapter 4.

Like Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at first seems to take Jesus literally and misunderstands what he means when he says (paraphrasing), "If you knew who I am, you would have asked me, and I would have given you living water." The Samaritan woman is incredulous, maybe mocking, when she points out that this is a deep well, and Jesus doesn't even have a bucket. How, exactly, does he think he would give her a drink? Jesus responds that whoever drinks this water will be thirsty again, but not so with the water he will give. "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." (The inscription which will soon be found near our memorial garden fountain, by the way.) And the Samaritan woman, again understanding all of this literally, says, "Great, give me that water, so that I won't have to keep coming back to this well over and over again."

Interestingly, our passage in chapter 4 is followed by a story in chapter 5 about a healing pool of water in Jerusalem, beside which there are many invalids — blind, lame, and paralyzed. And there is a man lying there whom Jesus approaches (unlike Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, who approach Jesus). This man had been ill for 38 years, and he explains to Jesus that there is no one to put him into the healing pool when the water is stirred up. Jesus responds simply, "Stand up, take your mat, and walk." Others might need to immerse themselves in the healing pool of water, but the encounter with Jesus is an encounter with healing water for this man. And one more interesting parallel — in chapter 6, Jesus gets into a discussion with the disciples about food. "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." (6:27) As the discussion goes on, the disciples sound like the Samaritan woman who asks for the living water. "Sir," the disciples say about the bread Jesus is describing, "give us this bread always." And Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be

thirsty.” (6:34-35) Time and again, people ask Jesus about physical things that sustain life like water and bread, or about the biological process of birth, and Jesus responds that a relationship with him transcends all things temporal; encountering him is encountering the source of eternal life.

The fact that the encounter in this passage takes place in Samaria is also full of meaning. In the verses immediately preceding this passage, Jesus makes the decision to leave Judea to get back to Galilee. “But he had to go through Samaria.” (4:4) The necessity of going through Samaria seems more theological than geographical — what God is doing in Jesus is for ALL people, including people who are despised. The parenthetical remark, “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans,” is an understatement — Jews detested Samaritans, who had no role in the rebuilding of the Jewish nation. The understanding among Jews was that Samaritans had corrupted their traditions and misinterpreted their scripture. And the shock the disciples experience upon seeing Jesus talking with a woman further highlights how unlikely and unexpected this encounter is. It seems that the Spirit is indeed blowing where it wills, without regard for human expectations.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Who are “Samaritans” for you? Whom do you avoid, or who turns you off? Do you sense that God might be especially interested in “going through Samaria” and engaging with these people in your life and loving them where they are?
2. For what are people thirsting today? What is your greatest thirst, and how do you seek to satisfy your thirst? How does the world promise to satisfy you? Why are some advertising messages so persuasive? And by contrast, how does Christ promise to satisfy you?
3. “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

As noted in the background section, this verse is being inscribed on slate next to our memorial garden fountain at St. Stephen’s. See if you can find a nice day to sit in our memorial garden among the burial places of so many people, while the fountain gushes up nearby. What is the effect of encountering and pondering your mortality and the brevity of life, along with the eternal life that Christ says he has put within you?

4. “The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.”

Jesus seems to say that the time will come when it will not matter where one worships, that we sometimes focus too much on human traditions when it comes to God, and that God is trying to free us to experience the beauty, wonder, and truth of our eternal life with God at any time and in any place.

What do you know about the importance of worshiping at set times and in a set place? Some believe that setting aside or sanctifying certain times and places for worship is a way to prepare one to encounter God at all times and all places. What is your experience?

A prominent British monk, theologian, and former Dean at Cambridge University, H.A. Williams, once said that the only churches that will still be in existence one hundred years from now will be centers of contemplation, where people will learn meditation and ancient, contemplative traditions. What do you know about the role of churches in disposing us to encounter God in daily life?

A sandwich board outside St. Stephen's Church invites passersby to "Come in. Be still. Light a candle. Say a prayer. Go in peace." Many people from a variety of church traditions, or none, take us up on this invitation. How might something as simple as this help people to "worship in spirit and in truth"?

5. "Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see...'" (4:28-29)

"So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them.... They said 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.'" (4:32)

The Samaritan woman has an experience that changes her, and she says what Jesus says in the first chapter of this gospel to the first people who would become his disciples, "Come and see." Come and experience for yourself. The woman leaves her water jar at the well, perhaps because she herself has become the vessel of living water that Jesus gave her. The people of the city believe her and came to Jesus. They ask him to "stay" with them, a word that means to "abide" with them, and Jesus does so. The result of Jesus abiding with them is that they know from their own experience, not just from the woman's testimony.

What do you know about a person "embodying" the good news or embodying the Spirit, so that his or her testimony is compelling? What are the marks or characteristics of such an embodying?

And what does it mean for us to "abide" with Jesus? When have you had the experience of Jesus/God/the Spirit "abiding" in you, and you abiding in God? Is there a way for us to encourage or guide others to such an abiding?

6. "I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Sometimes we can be impatient to see the results of our labor. But can you believe that God is often using you to plant seeds that will sprout and grow into fruitful plants one day, but that you might never see? How are you planting seeds each day, with family members, friends, and even with perfect strangers? Can you be satisfied with this work of planting, believing that others will later enjoy the fruits of your labor?

And what do you know about being a beneficiary of the labors of others who have gone before you, perhaps even people who planted seeds in you? Do you periodically stop to thank God for those people?