

In Spirit and Truth
John 4:1-26

“I am the Messiah.” That’s what Jesus told this Samaritan woman. But why did He choose her to be the first recipient of such a dramatic revelation? What’s even stranger, why didn’t Jesus say the same thing to Nicodemus back at the beginning of chapter 3?

For at first glance, Jesus had a whole lot more in common with Nicodemus than He did with this Samaritan woman. Nicodemus and Jesus were both Jewish men, sharing bonds both of kinship and tradition. Moreover, Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jewish people, a member of the religious council, a prominent and important man. The woman to whom Jesus speaks in today’s passage – well, we don’t even know her name.

To make matters worse, she was a Samaritan, a member of a group the Jews despised. John tells us in verse 9 that in those days the Jews did not “have dealings” with Samaritans – no wonder the woman was so surprised that Jesus would ask her for a drink of water from her jar. Such a request would have been just as shocking as a segregationist drinking from a water fountain marked “colored” back in the Jim Crow days.

No, the picture of Jesus we see in this passage is so different from what we’ve already seen in the gospel of John. We’ve been introduced to Jesus as the eternal Word of God, the Word through which everything was spoken into existence. We heard John the Baptist say that Jesus was so important that he wasn’t worthy to untie His shoes. We saw Jesus commanding His disciples to follow Him. We saw Jesus controlling the natural world by turning water into wine. We saw Jesus exercising His rightful authority by driving the moneychangers out of the temple. So far in this gospel, Jesus is a magnificent if mystifying figure.

But in verse 6 of today’s passage, we see a different Jesus, One Who is tired out from His journey. In verse 7, He admits that He is thirsty and needs a drink. Yes, He is the Word of God through Whom all things were made. But in today’s passage we understand what it means that the Word was made flesh. Jesus became a man just like us, a man who got tired and hungry and thirsty. In fact, as Paul said in Philippians chapter 2, this act of taking on flesh was an act of the greatest humility, a humility matched only by His willingness to go to the cross for us, despised and rejected by those for whom He would die.

And that, it seems, is the connection that Jesus makes, not with Nicodemus, but with this Samaritan woman. For she also knew what it was like to be despised and rejected, to have others lord it over her and think they were so much better than her. And so we see that the humble King of Glory reaches out to the humble, revealing Himself to the needy, instead of to the proud and prominent, to the people like Nicodemus.

Well, what about us? How do we consider ourselves? It’s not to those who think they are important that Jesus reveals Himself. It’s not to the egotists, to those who think the world revolves around them. It’s not to the self-absorbed. It’s to the humble, to those who know they are not anywhere close to the top of the heap.

Oh, but how could Jesus choose to reveal Himself to a Samaritan? After all, if the Jews despised them, they had good reason. In modern terms, we would call the Samaritans heretics. They only believed in the authority of the Books of Moses. They rejected all the other books of the Old Testament. They didn't even sing the Psalms.

And that was no small matter. Because they rejected most of the Old Testament, Jesus couldn't appeal to most of the prophetic witness to explain things about His life and ministry to them. After all, God had told David that his Son would one day rule and reign over His kingdom forever – and we know that Jesus was the Son of David the people had been expecting for so long. Isaiah had predicted Jesus would be despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and that by His stripes, by the shedding of His blood, we would be healed. Micah had said that He would be born in Bethlehem.

But none of those prophecies would mean anything to Samaritans, because they didn't believe in the truth of any of those Scriptures. Why should Jesus reveal Himself to a Samaritan?

In contrast, Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and although they have gotten a bad reputation for the way they eventually opposed Jesus, the Pharisees were the religious group who at the time took all of the Scriptures most seriously. The Pharisees were the ones who honestly tried to follow every detail of the Law of Moses, and who believed in all the predictions of the prophets. So, if Jesus had wanted to, He could have revealed Himself to Nicodemus. He could have led Nicodemus through the writings of the prophets, showing how all of them had predicted Jesus' own life and ministry.

Worse yet, during the course of this interview, it's the Samaritan woman, not Jesus, who brings up their fundamental theological differences, probably in an effort to avoid the uncomfortable truths He's telling her. In verse 9, she's the one who mentions the ethnic strife between their peoples. And in verse 20, she brings up the biggest single division between the Jews and the Samaritans.

You see, because the Samaritans only believed in the 5 Books of Moses, they believed that God should be worshipped in Mt. Gerizim, close by the place where this interview took place. The Jews, on the contrary, believed that, years after the days of Moses, God had told David and Solomon to build a temple in Jerusalem. Moreover, the Jews believed that God had told subsequent prophets that the Temple should be rebuilt on the same spot in Jerusalem after it had been destroyed.

It's the Samaritan woman who reminds Jesus of their differences. She flings her ignorance and her error in His face, and uses them to push Him away, to bring an end to the discussion. And yet she is the one, in all her ignorance and in all her error, to whom Jesus chooses to reveal Himself – not to the knowledgeable, respectful expert on the Scriptures, not to Nicodemus.

Okay, Presbyterians, what does this say to us? For if there's anything in which we tend to take pride, it's in our theological knowledge. We've got that Book of Confessions, which sums up so many important Scriptural truths. We're the ones who have taken the lead in bringing education to the Church and the world for many centuries.

And what about us conservative, evangelical types? Aren't we the ones who know the right things about the Scriptures? Aren't we the ones who believe what it says and who try to live according to its dictates?

And yet in this passage we see Jesus, in all His humility, revealing Himself not to the knowledgeable, but to the ignorant, not to the respectful, but to the resistant. No, He doesn't gloss over the Samaritans' theological errors or ignore them. In verse 22 He makes it quite clear that it is the Jews who are right and the Samaritans who are wrong – the reason the Samaritans don't know about their salvation is because they have rejected so much of the prophetic witness to Jesus.

But at the same time, Jesus points out that He Himself is the key to reconciling these different views of worship. With the coming of the Messiah, all questions about the location of the Temple simply became irrelevant. It is Jesus Himself Who is the glue that holds all His people together. And Jesus offers Himself, He offers a place within the people of God, not to those who think they know it all, but to the ignorant – to those who aren't even interested.

Oh, but theological differences always express themselves in actions, and the worst of heretics are often the worst of sinners. Sure, it's the doctrine of Scripture that is the most important distinction within the Church today. But how are our varying views of Scriptural authority played out? In our denomination, those who believe Scripture means what it says are holding the line for traditional ordination standards, saying that only those who are faithful in a marriage of a man and a woman or who are chaste in singleness should be officers in the church. On the other hand, those who reject certain parts of the Scripture, in much the same way that the Samaritans did, say that people should be able to be ordained regardless of their sexual activities.

But those who wish to broaden the Church's understanding of ordination couldn't be any more confused about matters of sexuality than this woman was: she's been married five times, and was now living with a man who wasn't her husband. That's extreme even by our rather lax modern moral standards. No wonder this woman came alone to draw water at noontime instead of coming with the rest of the women in the cooler parts of the day. In continuing to look for love in all the wrong places, she has found herself more and more isolated from her community.

But Jesus doesn't despise her or reject her because of her sin. For Jesus not only reaches across racial and ethnic barriers and across lines of theological hostility. Jesus reaches across boundaries of moral condemnation. Jesus takes the initiative and persists in building a relationship, not with the self-righteous Nicodemus, but with this sinful woman, patiently revealing Himself to her so fully and so plainly. Jesus reaches out to the humble and to the hostile and to the sinful.

So, maybe you are like Nicodemus today. Maybe you think you're basically a good person, someone who has it all together. Maybe you think you've got all your theological ducks in a row – you've walked the aisle and said the sinners' prayer and you've got your heavenly fire insurance all paid up. Maybe you take pride in your respectability, perhaps even in the fact that you are a member of the Church. Well, just like Nicodemus, don't be surprised if Jesus passes you by.

No, Jesus chooses to reveal Himself to people who are quite different – to those who know they don't have it all together, to those who know they don't know it all, to those who are all too aware of the sins with which they struggle. It is not to the proud but to the humble that the Word of God made flesh, that Jesus in all His humility reveals Himself.

For at the end of the day, Jesus' message only makes sense to people like this Samaritan woman. Look at how Jesus spoke into her situation. Of course, He knew she was sinful. He knew that she had made a big mess out of her life. But that's why the first thing He offers her is living water, the only kind of water that could be used for Old Testament cleansing rituals. Make no mistake – Jesus was not condoning her lifestyle. Instead, He was offering her the power to change, the power to be made whole and new, the power to be acceptable to God in every way. And the offer of such cleansing power only makes sense to those who know they are sinful, to those who know they need to be washed.

Is that what you need today? Do you need the cleansing power of Christ to come into your life, to free you from those habits, those addictions, from that self-focus that makes you feel trapped? Do you need the cleansing power of Christ to enter all those difficult, conflicted relationships in which you find yourself ensnared? Just ask Jesus, and He will give you living water, water that washes you clean.

How did Jesus speak into this woman's situation? It was obvious that she had long since ceased to hope that her life could really improve. Instead of looking forward to the future, she's completely focused on the past: in verses 11 and 12, she simply can't imagine that Jesus could offer her anything more than her ancestors did. Her greatest ambition is simply to have a little more material comfort in life. All she wants is running water in the kitchen.

Is that where you are today? Are you focused on the things of this world because you are convinced that that's all there is? All the pleasures of this world are fleeting. We only enjoy them for a time, and then we desire them again. If we focus on worldly pleasures – money, relationships, food, any sort of thing, most of the time, it takes more and more of whatever it is to satisfy us. If our hearts are focused on the things of this world, we will remain hungry. We will go on thirsting.

But Jesus promises so much more than this world has to offer. He offers us, not water from outside of us that can never fill us up, but water from within, the water that symbolizes the presence of the Holy Spirit, an active and vigorous infilling that springs up and overflows, bringing blessings not only to ourselves but to others. Jesus offers us not the pleasures of this world that come to an end when this life ends, but the eternal pleasure of eternal life, of life lived in the presence of God both now and in the life to come.

In fact, the greatest blessing Jesus offers to the woman is the same blessing that He offers to all of us – the blessing of Himself. It is because of His persistent pursuit even of those who push Him away, it is because He never gives up on His people, it is because He is determined to be in relationship, not with the self-righteous and the smug, but with sinners like this Samaritan woman and with sinners like us, it is because Jesus keeps on reaching out to us that all who trust in Him can worship Him as He deserves, in Spirit and in Truth.

For it is only because Jesus, the author of all Scripture, is beside and within all His people that any of us can understand the truth of His Word. And it is only because the Holy Spirit dwells within all who trust in Christ that we can know our prayers are answered and our praise is accepted – because we are worshipping the God of the Universe while being indwelt by that very same God.

Are you longing for something greater, something permanent, something more? Do you long for a closer walk with Jesus, to know His presence, to feel His love? Ask Him, trust Him, and He will give Himself to you.