

SLD02.24.08 Third Lent
Emory Presbyterian Church
John 4:1-30, 39-42
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“If We Only Knew....”

Today's lesson from the fourth chapter of John begins with a rather odd conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman standing by a well. Odd because although ostensibly the two are talking to each other, what with all the missed cues, non-sequiters, and double entendres, one gets the impression that two very different conversations are going on. It's Jesus' longest conversation in all the Gospels but pretty much everything he says goes right past his conversation partner.

Of course, we all know that Men Are From Mars (and) Women Are From Venus, but is it just a matter of gender difference that Jesus' vague and loaded metaphors float like seeds in a breeze past the soil of the Samaritan woman's earthy pragmatism, that “living water, eternal life, salvation, spirit, truth” flutter right on by “bucket, well, drink, husband, and mountain,” and make no purchase? Surely there's more to it than that. Still, in her book Clueless Men and Angry Women, Holly Faith Phillips writes something else we all know - that “Communication means getting your message across. Talking doesn't mean you're being understood.”¹

Curious about what else might be happening when two people talk right past each other, I came across some jargon in the field of communication regarding the socio-psycho-linguistic transactive nature of conversation. A lot's going on when people talk to each other, this theory says, much of it linked to who the conversation

¹ www.christianitytoday.com/mp/7m2/7m2070

partners are, how they're feeling at the moment, and their respective but often unrelated, goals, resulting in multiple "grapho-phonetic miscues." To understand why, suggests the theory, one might try a thoughtful Retrospective Miscue Analysis² That is, think back on who the speakers are and what they want, what was said by whom, what was missed, and why.

So, let's think together about who the speakers are in the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, what each wants, who said what, and why together they produced such monumental grapho-phonetic miscues.

About Jesus, we know that he is the Son of God roughly in the middle of his earthly ministry, currently traveling on his way from Judea to Galilee, passing at the moment through the foreign territory of Samaria. Tired and thirsty from the road, he comes across a well, sees a woman with a bucket, and asks her for a drink.

About the Samaritan woman, we can suspect that it's likely been a long day, she's hot, and hauling water back and forth from a well is a drag. And here's some Jewish guy (read foreigner) hanging around, probably wanting to bum a drink.

But there's more on the "socio-psycho-linguistic" front we need to know about the Samaritan woman: that, for example, she is a 1st century semitic woman – and 1st century semitic women are not accustomed to being directly addressed by unfamiliar 1st century semitic men, especially in public.

What's more, the Samaritan woman is...well...a Samaritan. And Samaritans and Jews do not get along, their enmity dating back some 700 years to the time when Samaria, the northern kingdom of Israel, fell to Assyria. Under Assyrian rule, foreign people and foreign gods, were introduced to the region. To the horror of Judean Jews,

² www.readingmatrix.colm/articles/theurer.

many Samaritans began worshipping these foreign gods. To make matters worse, some 400 years later the Samaritans actually built a shrine of their own on the mountain of Gerizim, in direct competition with the Temple in Jerusalem. To devout Jews, this was an unforgivable affront, making all Samaritans anathema to the Jewish community. The Samaritan woman at the well that day would not have expected the Jewish stranger even to address her, never mind ask for help. Yet:

He says: **Give me a drink.**

She says: **Why are you asking that of me?**

He says: **If you knew who I was, you'd be asking me for a drink, of living water.**

She says: **You got no bucket and the well is deep. Just where you gonna get this living water? Anyway, who do you think you are?**

He says: **Drink *your* water and you'll be thirsty again. Drink *my* water and you'll never thirst again.**

She says: **Oh sure, I'll take some of that - it'll save me time and effort.**

He says: **Run get your husband.**

She says: **(Now where did *that* come from?) I've got no husband.**

He says: **I know that's true. Let me tell you who you are and who you've been.**

She says: **Oh, you're a prophet. Okay, so maybe you can tell me whether we should in here or down at Glenn Memorial?**

He says: **Wrong question. Doesn't matter where you worship but how. You gotta worship God in spirit and in truth.**

She says: **Yeah, sure. The messiah's coming and I reckon he'll have the straight word on *that* score.**

He says: **Hello. You're looking at him.**

She says: **Nah. Really? No way.**

He says: **Way.**

(Hand gesture.) One big “grapho-phonetic miscue,” wouldn’t you say?

Information is what the Samaritan woman is after; explanation, clarification, the straight scoop. But the only information Jesus gives her is about herself. More important to Jesus seems to be conveying a truth, revealing a mystery, relaying a revelation. And the revelation Jesus is trying to convey is this: that the water Jesus gives is *living* water, that those who drink of it will never be thirsty, for that water will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

“If you only knew the gift of God...,” he says to the woman.

According to Gail O’Day, Professor of New Testament at Candler School of Theology, all the Gospel of John’s narrative, dialogue and figurative language revolves around providing a fresh answer to the question, “Who is Jesus?”³ What does the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman tell us about who Jesus is?

That he is a gift from God, source of renewal and of life, itself – this we have established. But why on earth choose to make this revelation to a contemporary female of an enemy people?

Unless maybe this, too, reveals something about Jesus - not just who he is, but whom he is for. For whom he was sent. To whom he offers new life. “Thank God I wasn’t born a woman,” prayed Jewish men of the time. Was it because they imagined God’s greatest gifts to be reserved only for the males of the human species? Or just for Judean Jews? Or people who believed like them? Or behaved like them? Or wanted what they wanted?

³O’Day, Gail. “John.” The Women’s Bible Commentary, edited by Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe, pp 293-296. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992.

In today's story, simply by asking the Samaritan woman for a drink of water, Jesus systematically blows every defining boundary and cultural norm of his day. No wonder his disciples are astonished. And not just in today's story but throughout the gospels, Jesus consistently refuses to define, judge, reject or withhold God's blessings according to any man-, or woman-, made boundaries. Again and again we witness Jesus reaching through ordinarily impermeable barriers to renew faith and hope, to refresh the spirit and the soul with the living water that is God's gift through him to all creation.

If we only knew the gift of God....

One year ago this week, news raced through this congregation about a dreadful car accident involving Mary, wife of Johnson, pastor of the fellowship which has been our sister Kenyan communion for two years, also this week. Already we were reeling from Bennett's wrenching accident the Ash Wednesday before, praising God that he had made it through alive, praying God would knit together quickly his bruised body and assaulted spirit. Then came word of Mary's accident on the way home from her night shift as a Neonatal ICU nurse at Crawford Long.

Mary was badly hurt, and taken immediately to Grady Hospital Emergency – her wrist broken in several places, her left leg trashed, eventually requiring four different surgeries to straighten out. Worse, Johnson was out of the country in Birmingham, England, tending to his doctoral studies. How would she manage? Who would take care of the children?

Johnson came home straight away, of course, and did all he could to hold his family, and his church, and himself, together. Only Kenyan men don't cook. Or take

care of children. Or the household. I mean, they really don't. It's just not done. Not that Johnson wouldn't; he would and he did – why, I'd hereby pronounce him liberated! But he had no experience with such tasks, nor, tackling them and tending to Mary, had he any time to work outside the home for income, never mind pursue his much beloved doctoral studies.

It was a dark and difficult, difficult time for the family.

But through the Kwanza and Emory Church communities, Jesus offered Mary living water. "Sir, you have no bucket," Mary might have said. "We are strangers in this land – who know us? Who cares about us? I am badly hurt. I am alone. Where is my husband? Who will help us? Who will care for my children?"

The people of Kwanza and Emory Church kicked in, and cooked and cleaned and took care of the kids. Johnson kicked in, and cooked and cleaned and took care of the kids. We collected money, we lobbied Presbytery for money, they lobbied the Board of Pensions for money. The cooking, the cleaning, the caring, the money...it was good, but it was not enough.

Everyone who ate of the casseroles we made, they would get hungry again. Every room we cleaned would get dirty again. Every kid we cared for would get lonesome again. Every dollar we collected would get spent again. We could never do enough. We could never be enough.

But the testimony we made, the witness we gave, not to our own goodness or generosity - Good Lord! that could never be enough to fill all the needs, heal all the wounds or order all the chaos caused by Mary's dreadful accident - but the witness we as a faith community did our best to offer of the living, healing, filling water of Jesus

Christ, now *that* made serious purchase with Mary. So much so that on this first day of this very special week of Mary's life in which she celebrates not only the anniversary of her accident but the anniversary of her giving her life to Christ, the 2nd anniversary of the founding of Kwanza, and her own birthday, Mary wishes to share the fullness of her heart with us through song, through sharing with us a song of thanksgiving to God. In preface to this song Mary is about to sing for us, she asked me to read these words she wrote:

This song is a praise to the Lord for who He has been and what He has done. I wish to dedicate this song to you of Emory Presbyterian Church

- *who wondered (when you heard of my accident) "who are they talking about?" Yet you were touched by what happened to me and you gave your time and money.*
- *who shared your flowers that brightened that very dark February 25, 2007.*
- *who made sure I had a hospital bed to lay on once the ambulance arrived (home) from Grady.*
- *who worried that my children would not have to eat broccoli, which they disliked.*
- *who googled the Internet to find out what Kenyans eat.*
- *who gave my children a swimming lesson, so they could have a normal child's day while mom lay in a hospital bed.*
- *who shared Psalm 71 as we sipped Odwalla juice.*
- *who demanded that I wiggle my toes because the doctor said they had to be wiggled quite often!*
- *who made sure I had soup in jugs to go with all the pasta.*
- *To you all – the congregation of Emory Presbyterian Church, I dedicate this song.*

Listen now for the living water of Jesus Christ that we, and Mary and Johnson and their children, have become for one another.

Mary's song

Jesus says that the water he gives becomes, in all the shapes, and sizes and structures of our scandalous selves, a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

If we only knew the gift of God....

...not because of what I say, or Mary sings, but because we ourselves have heard and experienced for ourselves that Jesus Christ truly is the Savior of the world...surely we would ask him for a drink.

To the glory of God. Amen.