

SLD03.27.11 Third Lent
Emory Presbyterian Church
John 4:1-30, 39-42
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“What Does She Know...?”

Today's lesson from the fourth chapter of John narrates a rather peculiar conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman standing by a well. Peculiar at the very least because no one in 1st century Palestine would have imagined these two even addressing one another in the first place. But peculiar also because their conversation – the longest Jesus has with anyone in the gospels – seems at first so disconnected, as if two very different conversations are going on at the same time. Indeed, for most of their dialogue, most of what Jesus and the woman have to say to each other seems to whiz right past each other.

The book *Men Are From Mars/Women Are From Venus* suggests different communication styles between men and women. Is this the reason Jesus' loaded metaphors float like seeds in a breeze past the soil of the Samaritan woman's earthy pragmatism? Or is it because the two hail from such different religious traditions – Jesus a Judean Jew and the woman a Samaritan – that “living water, eternal life, spirit, truth,” flutter right past “bucket, well, drink, husband, and mountain?”

In her book *Clueless Men and Angry Women*, Holly Faith Phillips points out that at the very least, “Communication means getting your message across. Talking doesn't mean you're being understood.”¹ Is Jesus a clueless man, the Samaritan an angry woman?

Say experts in the field of communication, besides the actual words being exchanged, there's always “a lot going on when people talk to each other; all kinds of other information

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

being transmitted about who the speakers are – their history, their hopes, their fears, their social “location,” if you will. But also how they’re feeling right in the moment, how they’re reacting to the chemistry between them, and the direction the conversation is going.

In order to figure out what’s going on between two people conversing, especially when they’re talking to, through, and past, one another, communication theory suggests what is called a Retrospective Miscue Analysis.² A Retrospective Miscue Analysis. I can think of a lot of conversations that could benefit from a “retrospective miscue analysis,” can’t you?

The idea in a retrospective miscue analysis is that you think back over a conversation keeping in mind who the speakers are, where they come from, and what they need or want from one another. In order to understand why some ideas are grasped and others missed altogether, you look at who the speakers are, who says what and why, as well as their respective stakes in the matter.

So let’s do a retrospective miscue analysis of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman to see if we can figure out what’s going on for them during today’s conversation? Who are these two, where are they coming from, and what do they really want from one another?

About Jesus at the time of this encounter, we know him to be the Son of God, roughly in the middle of his three year ministry on earth. And we know he’s a Jew from Nazareth traveling in foreign territory, likely tired and thirsty from days on the road.

What he likely looks like to the Samaritan woman when they come across one another at the well is a hostile foreigner, a Jewish rabbi, traveling alone for some odd reason through her land. Never would she have imagined him addressing her, a lone Samaritan woman of questionable repute. For one thing, Semitic men don’t address women in public, especially a

woman alone. But further, Jews avoid addressing Samaritans under *any* circumstances.

The enmity between Samaritans and Jews dates 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, many Samaritans began worshipping these foreign gods. To make matters even worse, some 400 years later the Samaritans actually built a shrine on the mountain of Gerizim in direct competition with the Temple in Jerusalem. This was an unforgivable affront, making all Samaritans anathema to the Jewish community.

For her part, the Samaritan woman has had a rough life, full of disappointment and loss. She's been married five times, meaning her husbands have died, one after another. Each time one died, levirate law would require the next of kin to marry her. Maybe there were no more next of kin now. Or maybe, given her track record, no next of kin would agree to marry her. Was she suspect in the deaths of her husbands, or just considered bad luck? In any case, the time of day she is coming to the well suggests that perhaps she is one avoiding, or being avoided, by others. Everybody else would have gotten their water early, before the sun was so high.

If she is avoiding her own community, how much more a foreign, solo Jewish male? Yet this rabbi walks straight up to her and says,

² www.readingmatrix.colm/articles/theurer.

“Give me a drink.”

Why are you asking that of me?

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

You've got no bucket and the well is deep. Just where are you gonna *get* this living water?

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

Oh sure, gimme some of that – it'll sure save me time and effort.

Run get your husband.

(Where did *that* come from?) I've got no husband.

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

Oh, so you're a prophet. Okay, so maybe you can tell me we should be worshipping, here at Emory Church or at Glenn Memorial down the street?

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

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

Hello. You're looking at him.

No. Really? No way.

Way.

(Hand gesture.) In retrospect, one big miscue after another, wouldn't you say?

Information seems to be what the Samaritan woman is after – explanation, clarification, the straight scoop on some divisive questions. 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 just what *is* the revelation Jesus is trying to convey to the Samaritan

woman? What is it he wants her to know?

According to Gail O'Day, Professor of New Testament at Candler School of Theology, the principle question addressed throughout the Gospel of John is this: "Who is Jesus?"³ So what is it Jesus is trying to reveal to the Samaritan woman? "If you only knew..." Jesus says to her. If she only knew...what?

That by asking her for a drink of water, he is intentionally blowing out of the water every defining boundary and cultural norm of their day? That by agreeing to drink of her cup, from her hand, that he is declining to define, judge, reject or withhold relationship according to any man- or woman-made boundary? Is this what Jesus is wanting the Samaritan woman to pick up on?

Or is it more one of those "don't judge a book by its cover" lessons. That just by looking at the stranger before her, the Samaritan woman can't possibly guess who Jesus is, *what* he is, never mind what he has in store for her. Is this what Jesus wants her to know?

Or that, when Jesus looks at the woman, he see exactly who *she* is, can tell her everything she's ever done, that he can see her inside and out. Is this what he wants her to know?

Reading someone so easily is alone a pretty impressive gift. Tell the truth – who isn't impressed when a fortune teller or astrologer or Tarot card reader seems to read us in some sort of intimate, archetypal way, who reveals something about us that is spot on?

Even just a hint of being "known," being read, being seen fully for who we are, is deeply satisfying to most of us. Indeed, who doesn't yearn to be known in such a way by *somebody*?

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.

Remember the movie, *Avatar*, when the two lovers first acknowledge their connection: “I see you,” they say to one another. Loaded, loving words exchanged by souls which genuinely perceive and connect with the essence of one another. “I see you.” Who you *really* are, the real, essential, core *you*. Behind all the masks and personas and layers of coping, I see you.

Is that what Jesus wants the woman to know? That he sees her in just this sort of way? In the sort of way that the woman, as all human beings, long to be seen and known?

The dramatic young poet speaking for the Samaritan woman Wednesday night dramatic put it this way: “to be known is to be loved and to be loved is to be known, and you know me, you actually know me, all of me and everything about me, every thought inside and hair on top of my head, every hurt stored up, every hope, every dread, my past and my future, all I am and ever could be, you tell me everything, and you tell me about *me*.”

Is this what Jesus wants to convey to the Samaritan woman? Not only that he sees her and *knows* her, but that he accepts and *loves* her?

Certainly the poet seems urgent with this possibility, frantically stumbling on to let Jesus know what this means to her:

“*And... that which is spoken by another*” she says (things like “this woman is an outcast, an adulterer, a whore, a murderer, homeless, gay, HIV-positive, dirty, nasty, selfish, angry, mean” – fill the blank with anything that puts you off – “that which is spoken by another,” says the poet, “would bring hate and condemnation, *but coming from you, Jesus, brings love and grace and mercy and salvation.*”

If you only knew...,” Jesus says to the Samaritan woman. If she only knew what? Where to worship or how to worship? Which rules to follow? Which traditions to honor? What

she must do or be to earn God's love? "If you only knew...."

"If you only knew...."

But then suddenly the Samaritan woman *does* know, *does* get Jesus' cues, *does* grasp what it is he wants her to know. And when she does, friends, when it finally dawns on her who Jesus is and what he is offering her, that what he wants her to know is that he *sees* her, *knows* her, *loves* her, *forgives* her, and offers her endless grace, mercy, hope and salvation, why, she cannot contain herself.

"Let me run back to town," says the poet. "This is *way* too much for just me. There are others, brothers, sisters, lovers, haters, the good and the bad, sinners and saints, who should hear what you've told me, who should see what you've shown me, who should taste what you gave me, who should feel how you forgave me, for to be known is to be loved, and to be loved is to be known, and they all need this, too, and we *all* do need it for our own."

And so we do, you and I and all humanity, need it for our own. Reckon what it would take for us to know what the Samaritan woman knows? What *will* it take?

To the glory of God. Amen.