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John 4:5-24

## **THE ULTIMATE OUTSIDER**

The gospel lesson this morning is one of the longest passages in the New Common Lectionary, it is suggested that we read through verse 42. I only read half of it to you, the story of Jesus and his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. It is a long passage because in fact it is the longest conversation that Jesus has with anyone in the gospels.

It is longer than any conversation between Jesus and his disciples. It is longer than any conversation that Jesus has with his accusers. It is longer than any conversation he has with his own family. John must have believed that it was a very important conversation, because he places it so early in his gospel, as the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth begins.

In fact, she is the first person in John's gospel to whom Jesus reveals himself. She is the first outsider to recognize who and what he is, and she is said to have become the first evangelist – converting many Samaritans to faith in Jesus. So you might think, OK, that's cool, or You Go Girl. But what's it got to do with me, on the third Sunday of Lent, in the year of our Lord 2011?

Well, for starters, she is a Samaritan, and we have a hard time reconstructing the depth of the hatred and loathing that was directed at Samaritans in those days. In the famous parable of the Good Samaritan, the real offense is not to be found in the fact that two religious professionals passed by the poor man who had been robbed and beaten and left half-dead in the ditch (we love to expose the hypocrisy of religious professionals), it was in the expectation that the hero of the story – the one who would come along to help – would be a Jew.

But lo and behold, the one who showed compassion was a Samaritan. And Samaritans were the ultimate outsiders. The reason they were so hated, besides the simple fact that they were Gentiles, is mostly lost in the dark pages of history. But we know that Samaritans believed that

the worship of God should take place at Mount Gerizim, not Jerusalem, and that they had a different version of the Torah. To this day, about 500 Samaritans continue to live near the west bank town of Nablus, which is in the shadow of Mount Gerizim. But make no mistake. In the time of Jesus, Samaritans were a despised class of foreigners.

They were as Protestants to Catholics in Northern Ireland, or as Muslims to Hindus in India, or as Palestinians to many Jews in the Middle East today. Tonight CNN airs a program entitled, “The Unwelcome Neighbor,” about the hatred of many Americans toward Muslims. They were the “other” that social construct tells us who we are by reminding us of who we are not.

For Americans for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we were *not* Communists. For many evangelicals today, they are *not* liberals or secular humanists, or evolutionists. For many of the most zealous anti-immigrants today (all of whom come from immigrant stock of course unless they are Native Americans), the “illegal alien” is the enemy against whom the wall must be built.

Name any civilization on the face of the earth and you will find an enemy, or a group of enemies. We seem to need them desperately. Jesus tries to tell us that what we need desperately is to *talk* to the outsider, to engage the outsider, no matter how uncomfortable that makes us, or them. As for the Samaritan woman, she is a *triple* outsider.

First, as a Samaritan, she is considered a half-breed and a pagan. Second, as a woman, she is simply considered an inferior creature, unable to hold property, or make decisions about any legal matters. Women were considered the properties of their fathers until married, and then the properties of the husbands. That’s why nothing in that world was considered more helpless than a widow, and women were not allowed to worship with men, whose morning devotions included the prayer, “Thank God I am not a woman.”

A woman’s place in those days was to be essentially invisible. They were not to be seen or heard. If you were a holy man, you were never to speak to a woman (who might, just by making eye contact I suppose, fill you with impure thoughts). Holy men did not even speak to their own wives in public.

One scholar reminds us that there existed in those days a group of pious men known as the “bruised and bleeding Pharisees”, so called because they closed their eyes when they saw a woman coming down the street, even if it meant walking into a wall and breaking their noses.

Now, we have established two of her three levels in which she is an outsider. She is a Samaritan and she is a woman. But the last is the most scandalous of all. She is a “fallen” woman. We know this not only from the conversation, but from the mere fact that she chooses to

go to the well in the middle of the day.

Respectable women would never go to the well in the middle of the day. They went in the morning, and they had social time at the well, talking to other women about the things that women talk about – which men have never really figured out, although we worry about it a lot!

The fact that she goes to the well at noon indicates that she is not part of the morning well group of respectable women, undoubtedly because they have shunned her. Why would she want to go with that group, since she was the kind of woman that might well have been the subject of their gossip. She's been through five husbands, which is only two less than Elizabeth Taylor, who just died and is being remembered as a Hollywood icon. Former Oklahoma Senator, Republican Mickey Edwards, was married five times. Proving that the more one talks about "family values" the more likely one is to divorce and remarry multiple times.

Just imagine then, in an age when divorce was a scandal and living with a man who is not your husband was absolutely taboo, this Samaritan woman must be the most infamous woman in town, the black widow. I don't think one can or should assume that she is a "bad" woman, because we know nothing about her or her life, but one thing is certain. She is not lucky in love. Or perhaps she is so strong and independent that she refused to put up with what most women in that day would have endured just to stay married. But this much is certain. She would have become an outcast among outcasts, an untouchable.

Meanwhile, Jesus comes to the well because he is thirsty, while his disciples go off in search of food. So he is alone, and the Samaritan woman is alone, both for different reasons, but both are in their own way outcasts. He is isolated by virtue of his message and lack of worldly power; she by virtue of her reputation, but both must draw water to live. It all comes down to water, which is more precious than gold, even more precious than oil.

She comes to the well when she thinks no one else will be there, just like there are people today who go to the grocery store in the middle of the night so as not to be seen. They'd rather not see or talk to anyone. Shame immobilizes us. It isolates us.

So just imagine her surprise when she comes in the middle of the day, when it is hot, and there sits a strange man at the well, also alone. It could be anyone, of course, but as one writer put it, "when he lifts his head and asks her for a drink, she sees the olive skin, the dark eyes, the strong nose." He is no half-breed. The man is a Jew, but what in the world is he doing here? Has he lost his way? Has he lost his *faith*, to be talking to her like this?

The Jews had endless rules about what they may and may not eat and drink. She knows that much at least, and she knows that this man will be breaking the law if she allows him to drink

water from her bucket.

So they talk about it, in one of those conversations that is peculiar to John's gospel, which is itself peculiar when compared to the other three gospels – in which Jesus operates on a different plane, and nothing is what it appears to be. He says water, and people think he means H<sub>2</sub>O, but they don't get it — he's talking about "living water." He talks about bread, and people think he means the kind you eat to live, but he is talking about the bread of eternal life. In John, Jesus is like this Gnostic Contrarian, and the message of much of the gospel is: *You just don't get it.*

So in your mind just imagine the scene. A marginalized Jewish rabbi, a Galilean sage without rank or priestly authority and only a rag tag band of disciples for credibility, meets up with a triple-threat outsider, a "fallen" Samaritan woman. He asks for a drink. She knows he shouldn't even be speaking to her, much less consider drinking the water that she drew from the well.

When he tells her that it is not just water he is offering her, she is puzzled. "Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" "This is Jacob's well, and many have drawn water from it, and lived – so are you saying that you have something greater to offer than life itself?" And he tells her that what the water he is speaking about is not just about relieving thirst, but about eliminating it altogether "when you drink of the water I speak of, you will never thirst again." So she says, "then give me some, I'm tired of coming to this well to draw water every day." They are still misunderstanding each other.

That's when the conversation abruptly shifts and Jesus says, "Go, call your husband, and come back." Wait a minute, she must have thought, weren't we talking about water? And suddenly, you bring up my husband; isn't that rather personal? She might have responded by lying. Or she might have said nothing. Women can say a lot, you know, by not saying anything. But instead, she squares her shoulders and looks him right in the eye.

"I have no husband" she says, and with that shred of truth from her, he tells her the rest of the truth about herself. "You have five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband."

Now at this moment (between you and me), I'm surprised that this was not the end of the conversation. Who could blame her at that moment for just walking away? I came here to get water, this Jewish stranger is acting strangely and then insists on confronting my life history. Either he is insulting me, or he just doesn't want to play games, It's almost as if he is doing what no one else has ever done—look her right in the eye and say, "I know you, but do you know yourself."

But she is not ready to go there, so she changes the subject, switching it back to religion. “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 Jerusalem.” Remember, this controversy (where is the proper place to worship God) is the great rift between Jews and Samaritans.

And then the response of Jesus becomes one of the most luminous moments in gospels, for in it, he demythologizes the notion of sacred space – revealing that he is light-years ahead of his time. “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. . .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.”

I guess if she wants to talk religion, he will talk religion, after all, she probably prefers it to talking about husbands. She certainly knows all about them, and if he knows all about them, there is no telling what else he knows, this man with the X-ray eyes.

Perhaps she is wondering, *if he knows so much about my life, what does he also know about God, and the coming of the messiah?* So she says, “I know the Messiah is coming. . .When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” In other words, the messiah will solve both my problems, and the matter of where to worship. These problems that divide us from one another will be solved when the messiah comes. And Jesus says, in effect, you are looking at him.

In John’s gospel, this is the first time that Jesus is reported to have said that to a single living soul. He says it to a triple threat, the least likely first person to have heard it in the known universe. Barbara Brown Taylor writes: “Both stand fully lit at high noon for one bright moment in time, while all the rules, taboos and history that separate them fall forgotten to the ground.”

By telling the woman who she is, Jesus shows her who he is. By confirming her true identity, he reveals his own, and that is how it still happens.

The debate that raged in that day is the one that still rages: How will we know when the Messiah has come? And the answer is, *Every time someone meets you in whose presence you know who you really are.* The good, the bad, and the ugly. And in one luminous moment, there are no divisions between us anymore. Fear, division, suspicion, separation — these are marks of the anti-messiah. But when we get to know one another, really know one another, that is when the messiah comes.

That is what makes the present moment so dangerous. Christians who run our state want to

turn the stranger, the outsider, the ones we do not know or understand, into a scapegoat for their own power.

At last night's CAIR banquet in Norman, a group of us from Mayflower listened to voices that are unfamiliar to us, and we practiced our Muslim greeting. . . "Assalamu alaikum" — Peace be with you.

And we remembered that Oklahoma was the first state to try to ban Sharia law from use in our courts when in fact no one was thinking of using it, and the people who wrote this legislation have no idea what Sharia is or why it cannot by definition be a threat to state law. But the good news is that Oklahoma is also the first state to rule such Islamophobia unconstitutional—when a female, African American judge (Vicki Miles LeGrange), who knows something about being the stranger, overturned it as a violation of the separation of church and state.

Last night eight of us attended the CAIR banquet and fundraiser in Norman, and Mayflower had a table for ten, but there were only eight of us, and so we made it known that we would like for two people to join us and a young Muslim couple took us up on it. I don't know if it was more awkward for them or for us, but they sat down and we did our best to make conversation. These are the Samaritans of our day. And there were very few churches present at that banquet. In fact, although I saw other Christians, I saw no other table that identified itself as a church besides Mayflower.

How odd, given that we are followers of Jesus, who said you can worship God on any mountain with anyone no matter how alone the two of you feel. To God there are not strangers and no holy places where the stranger is not welcome. So where were all the Christians?

We live in a world in which religion divides us instead of uniting us. We need to start looking one another in the eye, and dispensing with the small talk. We've got living water, and the world is thirsty, but we would rather be right than be loving.

Imad Enchassi was part of the program last night, who has spoken to us here, and is such personable and funny man. He said last night, to the whole crowd (and it was standing room only), that if he got kicked out of the Mosque, he would come to Mayflower. Even though he was warned, he said, not to go because we're not really a church.

We all rode down in the church van and there was a member of Temple B'nai Israel with us, Leslie Perkel, who was one of my students at OCU, and she said if she wasn't Jewish, she would join Mayflower. That's a Muslim and a Jew saying that they would have no objection to worshipping on our mountain — because they know that we know that our mountain is not the only mountain. We are all children of Abraham, and we know which mountain is really sacred.

All of them.

Really?

Really.

How do you know that? I follow a Jew who talked to Gentiles about more than just religion. He looked the stranger right in the eye and did not turn away. Now there is open seating at every table in the world. Make no excuse, he told me. Make room.

Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, March 27, 2011

Lord of Life, we pause to admit that violence is still the way we solve our problems. We do not talk to one another; we do not listen to the voice of the people; we hang on to whatever we've got and we defend it to the death, even though there is enough to go around unless some wish to take it all. Revolution shakes the Middle East, and tyrants slaughter their own people, and then we slaughter the one doing the slaughtering. We are trapped in the downward spiral of violence and don't know how to stop it. Our prayer this morning is for peace, for hope, for freedom, for an end to the bombs and the bullets and the wailing of mothers who lose their children. How long, oh Lord, how long? Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with us. Amen.

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