

A Storytelling Commentary on John 4:5-42

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So he 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."
For 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?
For 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 and 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
and 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.”

This story is a challenge to learn because it is a complex story. It is composed of two parts. The first part is the conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus. The second part is about the Samaritans and their coming to believe in him.

Jesus' discussion with the disciples occurs in the midst of the discussion with the Samaritans. The disciples here represent normal everyday Jews who are afraid of the Samaritans because there was constant battle going on between them: raids, conflict, people being assaulted when they came through Samaria. Talking with a Samaritan woman was a major violation of the law for a Jewish man. Men did not speak to women in public and especially not to Samaritan women. There were sexual connotations as well as the crossing of ethnic and political barriers. There is a whole lot going on in this conversation. The challenge is to convey that radicality and the reconciliation between Jews and Samaritans that is implicit in the Samaritans believing that Jesus is the Messiah. This is a remarkable story about the transformation of ethnic and religious conflict into the new bonds of community.

It is clearly implied that the Samaritan woman is an attractive woman. Maybe she was getting a little old after five husbands and now being on the sixth, but this also confirms that she was an attractive woman. For Jesus to ask her to give him a drink was extremely offensive, both because he was a Jew and because he was a man. The Samaritan woman's words can be told in a way that is flirtatious. If told in this way, the implication is that she is exploring the possibility that Jesus is asking her for a drink and violating expected social practice because he was interested in a more intimate relationship. While this is possible, it is more probable that she is asking why he has violated the normal social practices of Jews toward Samaritans. It is really arrogant of him to ask her for a drink because of all the Jews had done to Samaritans. She names this right away: "How dare you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink. Jews won't have anything to do with Samaritans." This approach to the story also regards the explanation of Jewish attitudes toward Samaritans as part of the woman's statement to Jesus rather than as an explanatory comment by the storyteller to the audience. In this approach, her initial response is one of being insulted and offended. Jesus' reply makes it clear that he is interested in a relationship with her but not a sexual relationship. He is offering a relationship that will transform her life and the relations between Jews and Samaritans.

In this dynamic conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman Jesus makes one provocative statement after another. Gradually her hostility is transformed into first curiosity and then respect. In order for this conversation to be credible as an invitation to the transformation of the woman, Jesus' voice needs to have no tone of disdain or criticism at all when he says, "You are right in saying you have no husband. You have had five husbands and the one you are with now is not your husband. What you said is true." It is simply a factual description. Jesus' voice is the voice of one who recognizes the truth but is utterly non-judgmental. If it were judgmental, the conversation would have been over. So, in order for these words to be believable, they need to be said without disdain or a tone of judgment or critique.

When Jesus and the Samaritan woman discuss religious matters, Jesus' statements about their relationship and conflict as Jews and Samaritans are radically different than what anyone else is saying. That is, Jesus is asserting that these conflicts between Samaritans

and Jews that have been going on for over seven hundred years have no reason to continue anymore. The hour is coming when everyone, Jews and Samaritans, will worship God not through sacrifices in the historic temples in Samaria and Jerusalem but in a spiritual and intellectual worship, a worship of spirit and truth.

This statement had special resonance for John's audiences because of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C. E. The Samaritan Temple on Mt. Gerizim had been destroyed by John Hyrcanus, the Hasmonean king of independent Judea after the Maccabean revolt, near the end of the 1st century BCE (sometime around 127-109 BCE). Thus, while worship apparently continued on both Mt Gerizim and on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in John's time (end of the 1st century CE), both the Samaritan and the Jewish temples had been destroyed. Given that both centers of sacrificial worship were gone, it was now possible to redefine the worship of God in new ways that would not be determined by the old conflicts around the two Temples.

Jesus identifies a possible relationship between Samaritans and Jews that never existed before. If you tell this, in part, as a diplomatic negotiation about a personal relationship and then a relationship between enemies, this story is a radical offering of a way through the conflict that redraws the framework of possible reconciled relationship. That is what Jesus does in this story, and the Samaritan woman recognizes it.

The second part of this story is about what happens with the Samaritans. The woman at the well becomes the first evangelist. She goes and tells those in the town what has happened—that Jesus had told her everything she had ever done. She is not yet fully sure, so she is still asking the question, can this be the Messiah? In the conversation with the Samaritans who then come and talk with Jesus, after his discussion with the disciples who are offended, he explains to them what's happening in relation to the harvest: this new relationship with the Samaritans is a sign of the harvest and they are involved in it. They are reaping the harvest that others have sown. It is a comment on what is happening in this reconciled relationship between Jesus and the Samaritans and, therefore, between Jews and Samaritans.

A reversal of expectations is implicit in this story. Normally, if a Samaritan village found out about this conversation, there would have been a battle. They would have either driven Jesus and his disciples away or they would have attacked them. What happens in this new relationship between Jesus and the Samaritans is a transformation of their political and religious history from conflict and alienation to reconciliation and peace. This is a story about the making of peace centered in the belief in Jesus as the Messiah. In the background is the assumption that John's listeners know about the centuries of conflict between Jews and Samaritans. Part of the dynamic of the story is that John's listeners recognized the wonder of the transformation that happens in the conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus and then between the Samaritans and Jesus. Jesus accomplishes a kind of diplomatic miracle that opens the way to reconciliation in relation to the deepest and most pervasive ongoing conflict in the history of the people of

Israel and Judea. And when understood in this way, the conversations of Jesus with his disciples and then with the Samaritans are a logical and dynamic completion of the initial conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. It is a wonderful story.