

March 15, 2020
The Gospel of Samaria
Annette Hill Briggs
John 4:5-42

⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."
⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ 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."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ 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. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵ 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." ²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

²⁷ Just then his disciples came. 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?"
²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" ³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." ³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." ³³ So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" ³⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² 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."

Is it a sin to be white? Of course not. It is a sin to believe and behave as though being white makes no difference in the world today. As if we don't have advantage, access and opportunity that others don't, simply by virtue of our race. If we are to be true to the gospel Jesus gave us, we can no more go around our white privilege than Jesus could go 'round Samaria on his way to the cross.

Samaria was part of Israel, a region between Galilee to the south and Judea to the north. And Jewish travelers generally went *around* not *through* Samaria, for one simple reason: they were not welcome there. Judeans and Galileans believed themselves better people, and better Jews, than the Samaritans. As you might expect, as you can hear in the voice of the woman with whom Jesus speaks, the Samaritans resented it. The resentment was about 900 years old, starting with Assyria. One group after another invaded and occupied Israel, Jews from Israel and Judah both carted off into exile in Egypt and Babylon, while most Samaritans stayed put and were occupied by the foreigners – Assyrians especially, who took them as slaves . . . and wives. The Samaritans maintained Jewish faith and practice as best they could, for generations.

In the fifth century BCE – when King Cyrus of Persia started repatriating whoever wanted to go home – the Jews who went back to Israel would have nothing to do with the Samaritans who'd been there the whole time. Jerusalem was a wasteland. Samaritans wanted to help it and the Temple. The returning Jews said, "*Y'all are nasty and we don't want anything to do with you,*" and were still treating them that way 400 years later, into the time of Jesus. They were a nasty, half-breed people, association with whom would violate one's religious purity. You could do business with them, but you couldn't eat with them, drink with them or socialize with them.

When I take Scout to the vet, she doesn't know where she is until we get to the door; and then she puts her butt on the ground, and I have to drag her and promise lots of treats. This is how I imagine Jesus got the disciples into Samaria. *As soon as we get to the first little village, you can go buy as many treats as you want.* And they all say, *yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!* It's also how he was able to go see the person he had gone to talk to in the first place. She might have been a rabbi, if she'd been born in another place and time.

Woman rabbis are a dime a dozen now. Jesus affirmed the rabbi in her, debated with her like an equal. Hers is his longest conversation in the gospels, the first to whom he voluntarily confessed himself as Messiah, "I AM."

Some traditions name her. Do you know it? I've told you before, but it's been awhile: Photine. Pick the word apart and you'll figure out what it means. *Bright as the sun, enlightened one*. Christendom has generally been more interested in her sex life than her intellect, her scholarship and her faith, while for Jesus it is the least interesting thing about her. I think he brings it up to get it out of the way, to say she needn't lie about what doesn't matter anyway – at least not to him. He brings it up to get it out of the way, so they can talk about what they both want to talk about – that is, the gospel of Samaria.

Would you pray with me? *In every place on this earth or in our own memory we are reluctant to revisit, places and memories that bear no resemblance to the people we desire to be, you have already been there, O God. Been there, looked around and restored it with your grace. May we know the same is true about our neighbors – all our neighbors, however different from us they appear. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

He asks for a simple drink of water. Her answer seethes with 400 years of oppression. Like that scene in *Little Women* when Laurie complains about having to leave for college. Jo says she'd commit murder to go to college. Like when the friend in our Global Women group refused to answer the conversation question in what other time and place you might like to have been born. "None," she said; "no time has been good enough to women to want to go back to it." His answer to her answer is everything she's waited for – someone to talk to about the things she longs to talk about. They are two rabbis, discussing biblical history and the nature of God in metaphor and symbol like a script she has rehearsed over and over again.

"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."

"Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

"Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty."

"Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus then ruins the moment:

"You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband."

Then her quip of comedy gold – “*Sir, I see you are prophet!*” – which she uses to turn the conversation back to the religious and political! Jesus follows her willingly. She speaks of their segregated worship – his people in Jerusalem, hers on the mountain at Gerizim. He speaks of their reunion – when they shall worship God not on the basis of negotiated territory, but in spirit and in truth. *I know the Messiah will explain it when he comes*, she says – what oppressed people always say when liberty seems too much to hope for. To which Jesus replies, *I AM the Messiah*.

A HUUUGE thing to say, but we aren’t given to see or hear her response – because the disciples are back. *Astonished*, John says. Mouths hanging open but no sound coming out. *What could he possibly want. He’s talking to a woman.* Friends, can you just try – just for a minute, try – to get your brain around the kind of either ignorance or arrogance it takes to be utterly shell-shocked at the possibility that the Lord of the universe might have reason to talk to a woman. I think we’ve mostly gotten over that. But the church still gets astonished that Jesus might talk to a transgender person. To someone we would call a white supremacist.

The disciples are astonished but, meanwhile, she’s put down her water jar to run to town, announcing, *Come see a man who told me everything I’ve ever done. He may well be the Messiah!* As they are on the way, Jesus deals with his disciples. They want him to eat. He tells them, *I have food that you know nothing about.* Again with the spiritual metaphors. They scratch their heads and stare like a tree full of owls. The Samaritans return and listen like he’s feeding them mother’s milk. He stays two days with them and they all end up believers.

Three things I want to unpack: First – can we please assume that when she says Jesus told her everything she’d ever done, she wasn’t talking about sex? But rather, about faith; about prayer; about the scriptures; about the things of God that had occupied her heart and mind for longer than she could remember. His disciples have been with him for months and all they know is that he talks to women and eats air, apparently. To her he offers up the essential truth of his existence: I AM. You are speaking to I AM. All we know of her response is that she drops her water jar and runs to fetch back her whole community. John doesn’t describe her heart and mind and soul blown open – since there are no words for that anyway. All we can see of it is the loss of bitterness and hate. The Jew for whom she’d not draw a drink of water is now the hero of her life, and she brings her village to him too.

Secondly – like her, enlightened by the presence of Jesus in our lives, we will find ourselves doing things we would not imagine otherwise. Being braver, louder maybe; leading communities to think and talk and act in different ways than they have before; becoming neighbors with people we once kept apart from. These are interesting days to talk about keeping apart from others. We may be called to get close in ways the world will caution against, called to ask ourselves what Jesus would do, what Jesus would have

us do, given his example and his teaching that we are obligated to the sick and hurting among us.

Thirdly, the gospel who is Jesus comes into Samaria and undoes 900 years of prejudice and racism, 400 years of segregation – not in the entire territory but in the hearts of those who meet him. Or, at least some who meet him. His disciples are not there yet. But there or not, they now have Samaritan sisters and brothers. Because as it turns out, the gospel of Jesus Christ in Samaria turns out to be the same gospel of Jesus Christ it was in Galilee. And getting our heads and hearts around that is, and has been from the beginning, the most astonishing thing about the gospel. *For God so loved the world*, the whole boatload of us. Jesus talks shop with a Samaritan woman as if they were standing in a synagogue, and his disciples have to pick their chins up off the floor.

One day in India our group was in yoga circle talking about our day, and Nancy – Nancy is awesome – said, “India has taught me that I actually don’t like monkeys. I only like the idea of monkeys.”

No wonder Jesus has to go through Samaria, else we’ll all just keep liking the idea of Jesus – the Jesus who thinks and talks and acts just like we think Jesus ought to think and talk and act. Instead, Jesus marches to the cross, dragging his disciples and church along with him, past all our prejudice and our privilege, through the sucking mud of our assumptions and our apathy, step by step, watching him meet stranger after stranger after stranger, until finally our idea of the gospel of Jesus is smashed to pieces on the truth of who he was, and is, and shall always be. As he told our sister Samaria – I AM.

Would you pray with me?