

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. These are tough times we are living through, with our governmental system under assault, our economy threatened, and our reputation around the world perhaps irreversibly damaged. And that was before we started a new war. Yet we seem powerless to do anything about it. I don't want to dwell on this, but I do want to acknowledge it, and to make a connection with the woman in today's Gospel reading. Because there is something going on in this story that is deeply important, but also easy to miss, and it's something can point us to hope.

There is a long tradition of male preachers beating up on this Samaritan woman for her supposed sexual immorality. She has had five husbands, after all, and she's currently living with a man who is not her husband. So, what else are we to think of her than that she is a woman of questionable morals? Well, how about we take the 8th commandment seriously and try defending her, speaking well of her, and explain her actions in the kindest way? (Hat tip to Martin Luther.) Because the truth is we don't know anything about the story behind those five husbands. It could be that they all died. That was the premise behind a question put to Jesus in all three of the other Gospels. Why wasn't *that* the first thing that occurred to our venerable preachers? That could also explain why her current partner didn't want to marry her. He may fear for his own life! But it might also be that none of the husbands died and they all divorced her. Husbands had that right. And why would they do that? Maybe because she hadn't been able to have children? Again, we don't know. But these are two possibilities that point more to tragedy in her life, things beyond her control, rather than some inherent flaw or misdeeds on her part. And maybe there is a mix of both of these options, and others as well, including some culpability on her part. We don't know. But we do know that real lives of real people are messy and complicated. We know that from living them ourselves, and mostly hiding the mess from others.

But ultimately, whether the woman is a victim of circumstances, a cause of her own misfortune, or some mixture of both is beside the point. There is something deeper going on here that connects back to the beginning of John's Gospel and also points us to its goal. John is using what scholars call a "betrothal type-scene" here, referring back to similar stories in Genesis and Exodus. In these stories there is a consistent five-step pattern: 1. A future bridegroom travels to a foreign land. 2. There he encounters a woman or women at a well, 3. Someone draws water from the well, 4. The woman hurries home to announce the stranger's arrival, 5. A betrothal is concluded, usually following a meal. This type-scene happens with Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, and then Moses and Zipporah. So, when John's original audience heard the setup here, of Jesus resting at well and a woman meeting him there, they would have been ready for a wedding story. Jesus has gone into a foreign land, Samaria, though this was once the territory of the northern tribes of Israel, and he goes to a well where a woman shows up. And the fact that this is Jacob's well makes the expectation all the stronger.

But then the type-scene changes the rules. No water is drawn. Jesus asks for a drink, but he doesn't get one. It turns out that he is a source of water who is indeed greater than Jacob who dug the well. It also turns out that the woman has already been married – and five times. But she does run back to the village to tell her people about Jesus. And while she's gone there is talk of food. (I cut that part out of the reading before I realize that this was an element in the type-scene. That'll teach me.) There is no actual meal, but Jesus tells the disciples that his food is doing the will of God. And then a bunch of people come and get to know Jesus and invite him to stay.

There is no literal betrothal in this story. But there is talk between Jesus and the woman about the division between the Jews and the Samaritans, and Jesus' promise that the goal is for their peoples to put their differences behind them and worship God together in Spirit and truth. A connection has been made between these foreigners and Jesus. In the days that Jesus then spends with them they surely asked him the same questions the woman did, and Jesus no doubt told them the same things, and maybe also some of the things he said to Nicodemus in last week's Gospel reading. The result is belief and trust in Jesus as the promised Messiah that both their peoples were anticipating. They have received Jesus as one of their own, and the two estranged families of Jews and Samaritans are one family again, at least here in this particular Samaritan village.

Now just in case you're not convinced that this is a legitimate way to read this story, let me point you to one more thing that sets the stage. At the end of the previous chapter John the Baptist shows up again. His disciples are asking him about Jesus, and specifically about baptism. John responds that Jesus is the one who supplies the real baptism, and then he says this: "You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' *He who has the bride is the bridegroom.* The friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled."

So what's the takeaway for us? These two chapters, John 3 and 4, are working together to draw us into relationship with Jesus. They are both about baptism – there is baptismal imagery all over the place here. They are about getting us to see our baptism is not merely as an act on our part of contrition and resolve to live a better life, as John's baptism was. Baptism into Jesus is rather God's work in us, birthing us into a new life by the power of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus was at pains to tell Nicodemus. Baptism into Jesus joins us to God in spirit and truth and gives us a new family that transcends our fraught histories, our old allegiances, and our messy lives, as this betrothal type-scene illustrates, if we have eyes to see. And that is a hint about *next* week's reading, so stay tuned.

Unlike Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman came to the well in the middle of the day, with her messy life somehow exposed to Jesus, just looking to keep life going one more day. It wasn't a great life, but it was what it was. But being exposed to Jesus, being seen and known by him and then not rejected or shunned, but offered his gift of living water, transformed her. We don't know what ultimately became of her, but she heard the gospel that day and didn't keep quiet about it, and I'd like to think that she was forever changed.

I also like to think that she would understand the messy lives we bring with us this morning, hoping for a sip of living water in the midst of everything that troubles us. May we drink deeply from the well of our baptism today and rejoice in our being joined to God's family as God's own children, and may that carry us through the coming week and through all our lives, anticipating with John the Baptist the joy of the final wedding feast that John writes about in the book of Revelation. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.