

Lent 3, Year A  
John 4:5-42  
February 24, 2008  
Bill Ellis

This morning's sermon is not really a sermon at all. Rather, it is some observations on a couple of different ways of interpreting this passage from John's Gospel. I am doing things this way this morning in part because I want you to see how creative people have been with this passage, and also because I think both ways of looking at this story really do speak to our situation today.

Of all the minor characters in St. John's gospel the woman at the well is perhaps the most important to many modern commentators. We don't know what happened to her five previous husbands, but presumably they either died or divorced her, and a woman without a man in that society was in serious financial trouble, often reduced to direst poverty, and thus she was forced by her society to play the part of what would have then been widely perceived as a not-very-particular-woman. The discovery that the man she was living with was not her husband would likewise have been an eyebrow raising revelation. For Jesus to be talking to her at all made him suspicious, and to be talking to her privately would have compounded the offense. Beyond this, she was a Samaritan, a member of a sect despised by orthodox Jews. So deep was this animosity that many Jews would not even set foot in Samaritan territory. She was therefore doubly condemned, and Jesus was doubly condemned for associating with her.

In sum, from the point of view of the audience for whom St. John wrote his gospel this woman stood among the most marginalized members of Palestinian society. Modern commentators have further noted what John certainly did not, that much of the marginalization this woman suffered was due entirely to the patriarchal structure of the very society that found her so unacceptable. Had she been able to own property and earn an honest living she would not have had to attach herself to the first willing man she found. Had her religion not been subject to universal scorn by the religious authorities she could have traveled freely and perhaps found a more solid place in society.

Over the past couple of decades therefore this woman has become what she was undoubtedly not to St. John, a feminist hero, an icon of the struggle against oppressive social structures that first make it impossible for some people to live free and creative lives, and then despises them for ending up in the positions that very society forces them into. Similarly, Jesus becomes in this story the one who shatters those structures and frees people to live authentic lives in the face of that very oppression. So, for example, Kathleen Fischer writes in her book *Women at the Well* that we live in a “polarized world and exclusive communities.” In such a world, she goes on to state “the power to label others according to these dual categories (of good and bad, out and in) belongs to that segment of society with authority to define things.” Fischer goes on to argue that Jesus didn’t live that way. “In carrying on a conversation with the Samaritan woman, he acts against exclusive community. It is an action in

keeping with his message that the reign of God welcomes all persons without exception.”

Though I believe that St. John would have been surprised to discover that his story was being read in this way, I think there is a great deal of truth in this analysis. What record we have of Jesus presents an uncontradicted story of his willingness to associate with anyone, and insofar as that is true, his very life itself constitutes a dramatic subversion of the power structures of his, and every society that create marginalized people, and then blames them for their status.

Yet, this is not the only power structure attacked in this story. There is another attack on a different power structure, and this one much more directly related to the text itself rather than the characters in it. It is a power structure, moreover, that the woman at the well herself believes in and indeed hopes to use. That power structure is religion itself, or perhaps I should say the way people use religion as a means by which to gain leverage. Jesus deals with this use of religion decisively as well.

John has constructed the conversation between the woman and Jesus so that it hinges on misunderstanding the meaning of “living water.” She thinks Jesus is offering her what we would call “running water” of the sort that comes from rivers, streams or artesian wells, none of which are to be found in the area and which could therefore he could supply only miraculously. It is this offer she readily accepts, for her belief is that Jesus has come to make her physical, temporal life easier. Indeed, it is not clear to her what other purpose he could

have in talking to her. Jesus of course is using water as a metaphor for that life with God which alone imparts true meaning to what is otherwise an empty existence.

But notice how common this misunderstanding is, and not just then, but now. Everywhere you look we hear messages of one sort or another that the principle purpose of becoming Christian, of believing in God is so that we can gain an edge, we can become more powerful than we currently are. The most recent edition of *The Atlantic* has an article in by Eliza Griswold, daughter of our Presiding Bishop just before Katharine. In she chronicles developments in the struggle between Islam and Christianity in Africa. One of those developments is presenting the Gospel as the best and surest means of becoming wealthy.

One preacher, a Bishop Oyedepo, has recently written a book entitled *Understanding Financial Prosperity* in which he declares that “God spoke specifically to me while I was in America for a meeting, ‘Get down home and make My people rich!’” That is the main purpose of religion, in his mind. Beyond this, a teacher named Prince Famous Izedonmi was quoted in the same article insisting that Jesus himself must have been wealthy, since the soldiers cast lots for his clothes, proving they must have been expensive. In a remarkable anecdote the article notes that on Sundays at some Nigerian churches armored trucks wait in church parking lots while believers hand over cell phones, cash, even cars “all with the belief that if they give to God, God will make them rich.”

Of course that belief is not confined to Africa; we see it here all the time in prosperity preaching that spans all denominations. Even those of us who are not prone to believe that the purpose of religion is to make us rich and powerful still imagine at least from time to time that if we are faithful enough God will protect us from the ills that humans are heir to. Indeed, I don't know that we can find any version of Christianity truly free from the belief that one of the important purposes of Jesus is to make our material life here on earth easier and better than the life non-Christians lead. The famous "Protestant Work Ethic" has within its very fiber some of this same hope. In this sense we are all heirs of that woman at the well, who saw in Jesus the means by which she would gain power and live in far greater ease than she had ever before experienced.

It is therefore worth noting that Jesus disappoints her expectation in a way that awakens her to his true purpose. First he shows her that he knows who she truly is, what she has done, where she has been. He reveals to her, in other words, that he has the kind of knowledge that only God has. The rest of the passage makes no real sense unless this is what John is suggesting. He then tells her that true worship is not confined to a place, but happens *whenever* people realize that God is truly and fully present *wherever* they are. This transforms her, so that at last she understands that true religion is not about using God as a tool to gain power, but rather is what happens, quite spontaneously, when people at last see that God is with them no matter where they are, or what they are enduring. Religion, in other words, is not about getting God to help us avoid the

pains of life, it is about realizing that when we enter into the pains of life God is there with us. The power of religion is not that it gives us an edge over non-Christians, some temporal advantage that no one else has that we can exploit, but rather is about opening up to the love of God, and the sense of real life, real purpose and meaning that comes from that.

And so we have today a look at Jesus who subverts two kinds of temporal power structures, one that would dehumanize some people for the sake of others, and one that would use religion as a tool to gain power over others. In place of these power structures he incarnates the God who is meets and accepts people as they are, and who is accessible to all people at all times. May the Spirit of Christ which transformed the woman at the well transform us also, that we might see what she saw and so become with her, people who spread the gospel of God's reconciling justice and love for all people wherever, and whoever, they are.