First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

3/12/23

A Study in Contrast

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.)[a] **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,[b] 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,[c] 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,[d] I see that you are a prophet. **20**Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you[e] 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[f] will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. **22**You[g] worship what you[h] 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,[i] 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,[j] 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[k] 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.”

Last week, we heard about Nicodemus and his midnight visit with Jesus. As I mentioned, we only hear about Nicodemus in the writings of John and today, we hear about the unnamed woman at the well, which also only appears in John’s gospel.

Now the placement of these two incidents is somewhat ironic, but not accidental. We are supposed to see the contrast between the well-educated, powerful, religious leader who is the ultimate insider, and the poor, unnamed woman who is an outcast from her society. This contrast is so blatant, and so obvious, that some of us might want to say, “Well duh!” “Hey John,” “Stop insulting our intelligence, would ya!”

But while the message John is trying to convey, may seem blatantly obvious to some, there are also many others who might be making this connection for the first time.

So, Jesus and the disciples have been on the road, for a bit, and for some reason, they find themselves in Samaria. This is significant because, as observant Jews, our intrepid band would have avoided Samaria like the plague. Samaritans practiced a different version of the Jewish faith, with their own version of the Torah, and their own Temple in Damascus. Naturally, the Israelites considered Samaritans heretics, and would have nothing to do with them. If word had gotten out that Jesus had even stepped foot in Samaritan territory,it would have been a huge scandal, resulting in much pearl clutching amongst people like our buddy Nicodemus.

Whatever the reason for Jesus and his disciples’ visit, it’s noon on a very hot day in the desert, and he’s tired and thirsty. So, he’s seated at a well and along comes a woman to draw water. Now the fact that the woman comes at noon to draw water, gives us a clue as to her standing within her own community. Women would have gone to the well early in the morning, before the onslaught of the desert heat, to draw the daily water needed for their families. To come out at the hottest part of the day, would have only happened if one wasn’t allowed to come any earlier.

So, Jesus is sitting by a well, tired, thirsty and alone. His disciples have gone into town to get some food, and this woman comes to draw water. Jesus asks her for a drink, which is actually quite shocking. Jesus’ request surprises the woman, because she’s very aware of the fact that this interaction goes against the accepted norms of not only her own culture, but of Jesus’ as well.

Here’s where the contrast between the conversation that Jesus has with Nicodemus and this unnamed Samaritan woman gets interesting. Jesus seems to have been impatient with Nicodemus, and If we take another look at John 2:3, I think Jesus’s reason for becoming impatient is clear. The verse reads, in part, *“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.”* Note the use of the word “we.” Now, I missed this last week, and if I had caught it, it’s possible that last week’s sermon would have turned out a bit differently.

Funny how one word can change the entire meaning of a passage of scripture, isn’t it? And, in this case, it appears that by using the word “we,” Nicodemus makes it clear that he’s not acting on his own, but on behalf of a group of Pharisees, perhaps even the entire Sanhedrin.

If Nicodemus is actually an emissary from the Sanhedrin, then Jesus’ rather harsh treatment is understandable. If these religious leaders, who knew the Torah inside and out, are willing to acknowledge Jesus’ true nature in private, but continue to publicly oppose his teachings, then they are practicing the worst type of hypocrisy. They know the truth, they see that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of the ancient prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, and yet their fear of losing power, position and wealth prevent them from publicly declaring that truth.

The interaction that Jesus has with the Samaritan woman, couldn’t be more different, than the one he had with Nicodemus. She’s an outcast, she’s someone who has not led a good, upstanding life, up to this point. And when Jesus calls her out on that fact, she doesn’t deny it. Rather than condemning her, Jesus offers her the living water of salvation and in that very brief interaction, she begins to recognize the true nature of the man who stood before her.

And what does she do? She leaves her water jug at the well and runs back to the city telling everyone around her, *“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah,[j] can he?”* Her joy at the possibility that Jesus is the Messiah is infectious, and the people came running to see if it was true. Jesus stayed with them for 2 days and we read in verses 41 and 42, ***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.”*

So, where does this leave us? I believe we are faced with a very similar set of circumstances in the twenty-first century church. Too often, it seems that the higher up the ecclesiastical ladder we go; the more power church leaders acquire, the less likely we are to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Oh, we may say that we are being guided by the Spirit, but we only truly mean it, if it doesn’t threaten the status quo. This is where Nicodemus, and whomever else he was representing, fall short. They knew the truth, but chose to protect their position and power instead of publicly acknowledging the transformative nature of Jesus’ message.

These days, we don’t often talk about prophets, except in the context of events long past. But what if prophets exist in our modern-day era? Might those who find themselves on the margins of society and the church, actually have the ability to be prophets and the bearers of God’s word? And if they are, what does it say about leaders and structures that choose survival of oppressive systems, over openness to the workings of the Holy Spirit?

How would Jesus’ ministry have turned out, if Nicodemus had displayed the courage of the Samaritan women and let go of his fear? You see, it took quite a bit of courage for the Samaritan woman to be a prophet from the margins. And, by being open to the workings of the Holy Spirit, not only was this woman on the fringes of society transformed, her entire community was changed as well.

Are we prepared to listen to modern-day prophets who preach the transforming message of the gospel from the margins? Do we reject, out of hand, the words of those who aren’t part of our socioeconomic class, or our gender, or our nationality or our racial ethnic background, or any number of other factors and conditions that society uses to divide us, simply because we’re afraid of the consequences if they’re right?

I challenge us all to be more like the citizens of Sychar. They knew who this woman was, and they knew exactly what she had done. In spite of that knowledge, when she told them to come and see a man who had told her everything that she had done, they listened and they not only came to see, they ultimately believed.

Folks, I believe that prophets exist among us today, and I also believe that we have a choice. We can be like Nicodemus letting fear of change keep us from hearing the good news, or we can be like the citizens of Sychar and understand that the message is more important than the messenger. Our job is to be willing to hear what the Spirit is telling us. Our job is to not let fear of change or loss get in the way of acting on the Spirit’s call. And our job is to listen and follow the promptings of the message that God has for us, regardless of how God chooses to deliver it. May it always be so, AMEN