

Rev. Lisa Schrott
March 12, 20
John 4:5-30, 39-42
Questioning

We are continuing our Lenten journey of stories that shape our faith. This morning we hear about the power of questions and curiosity to change the trajectory of a story that seemed to have a foregone conclusion. We are in the Gospel of John, relatively early in Jesus' ministry. He has called the disciples, turned water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana and overturned the tables in the Temple. Jesus and the disciples have been performing baptisms in the Judean countryside, in the areas surrounding Jerusalem. Jesus has been getting some unwanted attention from the religious leaders and decides that it is time to head back to their home turf in Galilee. The most direct route was through Samaria, an area that was typically avoided by the Jewish people, who would take a more indirect route. But not this time. We pick up the story here in John chapter 4 as Jesus and the disciples are traveling through Samaria...

John 4:5-30

So Jesus 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." (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?" (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. 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. 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. ...

John 4: 39-42

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 is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The South by Southwest Conference began Friday in Austin, TX and as I was scrolling through sessions that might feed my urge to procrastinate from sermon writing, I came across a session titled "Creating Cultures of Curiosity" set for Monday. "There's IQ, EQ, and now...CQ. Curiosity Quotient is emerging as a new superpower for succeeding in the workplace" the publicity blurb opened. "Based on our interviews with the most curious minds in the world, we'll teach you how to up your CQ by asking better questions and interrogating your relationships ... We'll help you get curious about your Curiosity Style, give you the question hacks we've uncovered to help curiosity thrive, and share the lessons we've learned creating organizational cultures of curiosity for the biggest brands in the world."¹ Well this morning, we have a story where the culture of curiosity is on full display, with both the unnamed Samaritan woman and Jesus engaging in the longest dialogue recorded in the gospels. The dialogue begins with the Samaritan's woman's curiosity about Jesus, followed by Jesus' curiosity about her story. From this back and forth questioning, the Samaritan woman becomes one of the first evangelists, leading many in her city to believe in Jesus.

"The Samaritan woman asks Jesus, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" No snarky response or aggressive passing of the bucket after Jesus asks for a drink. No, the Samaritan woman responds with curiosity - how is it that you a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria.

¹ <https://schedule.sxsw.com/2023/events/PP1143280>

You see the Jewish and Samaritan people did not mix. They lived in neighboring lands and shared a common heritage, but years of separation had left them as more like strangers - maybe even enemies. As one commentator has noted, "Imagine Roman Catholics and Protestants in early modern Europe, with their mutual bigotries, suspicions, and appetites for vengeance. Jews and Samaritans were likewise enemies, their similarities only sharpening their contempt. All this would make this week's story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman surprising to its early audiences, even scandalous."²

You see "Samaritan" was a kind of shorthand for traitor, heretic and adversary. The Samaritans were held in contempt by the Jewish people. In Jesus' day, Samaritans were the descendants of generations of intermarriage between Jewish people left behind during the Babylonian exile and Gentiles, the conquering Assyrians who settled in Israel. So the Samaritans shared a common heritage with Jewish people as descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but considered themselves poles apart. In addition to cultural differences, there were also deep-rooted distinctions in religious practices. The Samaritans held that the proper place to worship God was Mount Gerizim, and the Jewish people believed that it was the Jerusalem Temple. Mount Gerizim is the place where the Israelites blessed the ground after first entering the Promised Land after their years of wandering in the desert. In Samaritan tradition, it is the oldest and most central mountain in the world, towering above the Great Flood and providing the first land for Noah's as he disembarks the ark. The Samaritans also believed it is the location where Abraham almost sacrificed his son Isaac. In contrast, those who identified as the Jewish people, consider the location of the near-sacrifice of Isaac to be Mount Moriah. This became the site of the Temple Mount, the holiest of sites.

"The Samaritan woman asks Jesus, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" How is that you, a Jew, a member of a people who hold me, a Samaritan, in such contempt would ask me for a drink of water from the well? How is it that you, an unaccompanied man, would ask me, an unaccompanied woman, for a drink of water from the well, let alone even speak to me? You must know how wrong this is – on so many levels. I know your story and my people know your story. You know my story and your people know my story. And sir, our stories certainly do not intersect. 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." Well, it looks like the story the Samaritan woman thought she knew so well is going to have a different ending than she anticipated.

² <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/3/10/reconciliation-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-3>

One of my favorite TED Talks is from Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichi, who speaks about the danger of a single story.³ Adichi learned to read at an early age, reading British and American children's books. She began to write her own stories when she was about seven. This is her description of her stories:

“All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out. Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to. My characters also drank a lot of ginger beer, because the characters in the British books I read drank ginger beer. Never mind that I had no idea what ginger beer was. What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story...”

Adichi talks about how she made a mental shift in her understanding of literature when she read African authors, saying

“I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized. Now, I loved those American and British books I read. They stirred my imagination. They opened up new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are.”

Adichi goes on to talk about single stories that she herself has perpetuated or stories in which others made conclusions about her based on one piece of knowledge. It is a rich and beautiful talk, full eye-opening moments, as she shares about her family and her travels, her successes and her missteps. Adichi reflects,

“All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only the negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”

I think about the single stories in my own life; stories that flattened my experiences; stories I told myself about other people and their ways of life that limited my connection to them – that kept me from seeing them as the children of God that they are. Single stories about people that I thought I knew because I had seen them in movies and on TV shows and in books. Stories about Southern women- well more like Southern ladies – the ones who are in the Junior League and members of the cotillion and who lunch. The ladies who lunch. Not grab a quick lunch in between meetings or dine at their desk so they can feel less guilty scooting out

³ Chimamanda Adichi, The Danger of a Single Story. *TEDGlobal 2009*. Talk and transcript can be found at https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/comments/transcript

of work a few minutes early to catch a soccer practice or even the efficiency experts running errands at lunch. No, I'm talking about the ladies who dine with their girlfriends at real sit-down restaurants, wearing tailored clothes and jewelry, sipping non-happy hour priced wine while they catch up on the news of the tennis club, of the dresses for the deb ball, and the feats of their children.

When I met them at First Presbyterian Church Shreveport, Louisiana, I was sure I knew all I needed to know of those ladies, which was mostly that I didn't need to know *them*. About six months into my time in Shreveport I realized that I kept hearing accolades about this incredible organization that the church supported that provided transitional housing, education and life-skills to homeless women with children. Providence House was featured on the news and in the paper and people I respected at work were touting its success. And much to my chagrin, Providence House was founded by two of the ladies who lunch. And yes, another couple of the ladies who lunch founded Volunteers for Youth Justice that provides intervention services to youth involved in the juvenile justice system. And the Interfaith Pharmacy that provides free or low-cost medicines for hypertension and diabetes to those who can't afford them.

Eventually I became curious and spent time getting to know them, asking questions about their history and interests, learning how God had called them to move from conversation to action. And I found that yes, they do lunch, with their girlfriends. And yes, they do talk of the trivial, but it turns out in between bites of pimento cheese sandwiches and sips of sweet tea they more than chatter about society's ills, they actually strategize to heal them. They provide living water to parched and dry souls, to those society ignores at best and too often harm; to those in society we often think we know through a single story. These ladies that lunched built bridges and broke down barriers, and I initially dismissed them because I thought I knew all I needed to know about them and their stories.

The conversation and the questions exchanged between the Samaritan woman and Jesus were also barrier-breaking and bridge-building. The Samaritan woman doesn't gloss over their differences. She in fact challenges Jesus to resolve the ancient dispute between the Samaritans and the Jewish people about where one must worship God. Jesus smashes the narrative of the single story of both groups, answering that "the hour is coming" when both Jews and Samaritans will worship God "in spirit and truth." This religious divide will be overcome; there will be reconciliation and "the barriers between men and women, Jews and Samaritans, friends and enemies, insiders and outsiders, "us" and "them" will be destroyed" as one commentator notes.⁴

⁴ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/3/10/reconciliation-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-3>

You see single stories are not untrue, but they are incomplete. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, “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 conversation could have stopped there, defining the Samaritan woman by her marital status. But the conversation continued, with questioning and curiosity until we hear the Samaritan woman say to Jesus, “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.”

Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah to this unnamed woman whose story –a five-timed married woman of mixed heritage, one who came from a people who were considered traitors, heretics and adversaries of the Jewish people – whose story led people to look down on her so much that she came to get water in the hot and dry middle of the day, when no one else ventured to the well. Jesus reveals himself to this woman and the story ends with the Samaritan woman witnessing to God’s love and grace as revealed through Jesus. Many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony.

Chimamanda Adichie concludes her TED Talk by reminding us, “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.”

Friends, we have the power to repair broken dignity of those around us in the world. You see single stories are not untrue, but they are incomplete. This past Friday night we were blessed by having the Rev. Jimmie Hawkins with us speaking about how the church can be advocates to prevent gun violence. Rev. Hawkins also spoke at our Presbytery meeting yesterday. He described as an advocate as one who “speaks up and stands with.” This what we see Jesus doing – speaking up about injustices, questioning the practices that oppress and standing with those whose voice is too often silenced. We can follow the model of Jesus. It is about the personal connection, about remaining curious in the face of differences. The Samaritan woman at the well was not in need of a lecture on her sinful nature or even a deep theological understanding of Jesus’ humanity and divinity. What she needed was someone who cared enough to reach out, to be curious about her many stories and offer her a cup of the living water. During this Lenten season, let us be barrier-breaking and bridge-building; let us strive to speak up, stand with and offer the living water to those who are parched from the stresses and collective traumas of life. May it be so. Amen.