

June 9, 2024  
Rev. Lisa Schrott  
John 4: 3-28, 39  
*The Encounter*

The Encounter frames the next phase of our summer quest – our summer pilgrimage – as we examine how we are transformed when we move outside our normal routines – whether that is through travel to an exotic locale or whether that is opening ourselves to new relationships in our own backyards.

Our passage opens with Jesus and his disciples leaving Judea. You may remember two weeks ago on Trinity Sunday – Memorial Day weekend – we heard the passage from the previous chapter of John where Jesus has the curious conversation with Nicodemus about the need to be “born from the Spirit” or “born from above.” Following this conversation in Jerusalem, Jesus and the disciples went into the Judean countryside, and began baptizing people. John the Baptist was also in that area baptizing, and when a dispute arose over who the people should go to, John told the people, “No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him. ... He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.’”

Now the religious leaders of the day – the Pharisees – heard about Jesus’ growing popularity. And Jesus, wary of a confrontation this early in ministry, decided to head back to Galilee. Unlike other journeys they would take, Jesus and his followers took the most direct route home – through Samaria. This was a risky thing to do...you see the Jewish and Samaritan people did not mix. While they lived in neighboring lands and shared a common heritage, years of separation had left them as more like strangers - maybe even enemies.

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 exile and Gentiles, the conquering Assyrians who settled in Israel. So the Samaritans shared a common heritage with Jewish people as descendants of Abraham, but considered themselves poles apart. In addition to cultural differences, there were also deep-rooted distinctions in religious practices. The Jewish people believed that proper place to worship God was the Temple in Jerusalem, while the Samaritans held that it was Mount Gerizim. To make matters even more fraught, Jewish troops had destroyed the shrine on Mt. Gerizim about 160 years before our story this morning. You can easily see the parallel geo-political and geo-theological tensions in our world today throughout the Middle East. And you can easily see the parallels in the polarization we see in so much of our country today.

I have been reading a lot and listening a lot to discussions about the plague of polarization that is gripping our country, including churches. I attended a preaching seminar this week on

*Preaching the Letter of 1 John in a Polarized Church*<sup>1</sup>. While I am not preaching on John's first letter this morning, much of what Professor Janette Ok, from Fuller Theological Seminary shared is applicable to our text from the Gospel of John. She included the quote I used in the words of preparation in the bulletin this morning from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks:

“Something new is happening: the sense that the other side is less than fully human, that its supporters are not part of the same moral community as us, that somehow their sensibilities are alien and threatening, as if they were not the opposition in a political arena, but the enemy full stop.”<sup>2</sup>

Well I'm not sure this polarization is new, as evidenced by our text this morning, and yet I so appreciate Rabbi Sacks' words about the tendency to see the other side as somehow less than human and as the enemy. This is the context for our scripture from John 4. This is why the disciples were astonished that Jesus was talking to a Samaritan woman.

Think about this conversation with respect to the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus in Jerusalem. There Jesus was speaking to a male member of the Jewish religious establishment. Here he speaks with a female member of the “enemy people.” Nicodemus has a name, the woman at the well doesn't. Yet Jesus offers both them the gift of eternal life through the Spirit – being born from the Spirit – drinking the living waters – “the water that I give will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life”, Jesus says. With these two parallel conversations, Jesus breaks open the boundaries – the boundaries between male and female; chosen people and “rejected people.” The grace Jesus offers is available to all.<sup>3</sup>

The Samaritan woman did not expect this response. 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, someone who is Jewish, 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. Well, it looks like the story the Samaritan woman thought she knew so well is going to have a different ending than she anticipated.

One of my favorite TED Talks is from Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichi, who speaks about the danger of a single story. I have shared this story in a previous sermon a year or so ago, and I think it bears hearing again. 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:

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<sup>1</sup> You can watch the webinar at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfK1aFZw1a0>

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Sacks. *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, Basic Books. 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Gail R. O'Day Gospel of John. *Women's Bible Commentary. 3rd. Edition*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2012; p521-522

“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 of 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...”<sup>4</sup>

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 experience of other people and their way of life. They limited my connection to them and kept me from seeing them as the children of God they are. Single stories about people I thought I knew because I had seen people “like them” in the media. Jesus and the Samaritan woman reveal to us a different model. Their encounter moves them beyond a single story. The Samaritan woman doesn't gloss over their differences. She in fact challenges Jesus to resolve the ancient dispute 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 Jewish people and the 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.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 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](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/comments/transcript)

<sup>5</sup> <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 reveals himself as the Messiah to this unnamed woman whose story – a five-times 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 encounter 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 Adichi 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.” The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman happened because both ventured outside their comfort zones to engage with someone they could have seen as too different, too foreign, too much of the enemy, a person with a wrong set of beliefs and practices, someone who was dangerous to their way of being. Jesus traveled to a place where he is the foreigner and an outsider. While the Samaritan woman is in her hometown, she engaged with a man from the group that destroyed her people’s holy place.<sup>6</sup> This is an encounter between two vulnerable people, each of whom had something to give to the other.

Friends, in every encounter we have – whether we need a passport to get there or whether we meet on a familiar street, we have the opportunity to be changed, to be transformed, to receive grace. And we have the opportunity to form genuine relationships in a world that is too often polarized. You see single stories are not untrue, but they are incomplete.

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. This is the call for each one of us in our encounters and we have some wonderful opportunities this month to do just that. In addition to the Intergenerational Mission Week coming up, from June 20-28 we will celebrate Refugee Awareness Week. Stay tuned for opportunities to shift our perceptions, redefining “strangers” as “friends we have not yet met?” Join me in prayer.

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<sup>6</sup> Ashley M. Wilcox. *The Women’s Lectionary*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2021 p82.