

The “Other” Woman

She is, you might say, the “other” woman in the story of Jesus. I confess, I use this term at least in part because of its connotations of sexual misconduct, which will almost always pique interest. And, according to the standard interpretations of this text, that’s a perfectly legitimate label for this shady lady of Samaria. But I use the term for other reasons as well. The stories told in the Gospel According to John almost never work on just one level and this well-known tale of the Woman at the Well is no different.

But let’s begin with the familiar this morning, with what many of us already know or think we know about what has come down to us as a story of Jesus intervening in a rather scandalous life and causing repentance and change. For most modern readers, the opening of this story is not terribly compelling. There’s this bit about Jews not getting along with Samaritans and a back and forth about water and about ancient history. Blah, blah, blah. Then Jesus tells the woman to go and get her husband. When she replies, “I have no husband,” he says, “Right, you’ve had five husbands and now you’re living in sin with some other man, hussy.” Or, at least that’s what we hear him say. Oooh, now we’re getting somewhere! A juicy sex scandal and publishers of periodicals for at least a couple of centuries have known how we love those! I can still remember the piles of magazines that my mother and grandmother devoured for gossip about the stars they saw on television or in movies. In my childhood they often featured stories about the latest shenanigans of Elizabeth Taylor, who outdid our Samaritan woman by being married eight times to seven men and, of course, living with some of them out of wedlock. This type of story is still the lead in newer organs like “People,” or “Us,” or the like.

But if this is really a story about Jesus’ interaction with a local bad girl, and I’m not so sure that it is, then we need to notice a couple of things about the story. First of all, once the subject of multiple husbands has been raised, it is dropped just as quickly, not to be mentioned again. There is no prolonged scene of repentance, Jesus doesn’t demand a change in this part of the woman’s life before he reveals himself to her as the messiah, and the woman becomes, as our sisters and brothers in the Orthodox tradition say, “Equal to the Apostles,” by spreading the word about Jesus without any mention of her regularizing her marital status. In this respect, the story serves to remind us that God often acts through persons that we, in our wisdom, might consider wholly unacceptable. And while it is undoubtedly true that a woman who has married five husbands and is living with yet another man has certainly left a good deal of emotional damage in her wake, both for herself and others, it is also true that if Jesus can embrace such a one as a key figure in his work of spreading the good news about the Kingdom, then we should be very careful about rejecting those whom we find sexually transgressive. While it does not seem to have been a problem here at Good Shepherd Baptist during my tenure, I think it bears saying that we, like Jesus, should be committed to receiving all persons as friends, regardless of what their intimate relationships are, and allowing the Good News to change them as God needs them to change without condemnation from us.

But as juicy and fun as this interpretation of the story of the Woman at the Well may be, I’m pretty sure it misses far more of the meaning of the story than it captures. It’s true that the Samaritan woman is “the *other* woman,” but she is “other” in far more interesting and important ways than her apparent propensity for cohabitation. So I want to talk a bit about her various degrees of otherness and how we can interpret them to our situation. And I also want to give some time to what Jesus said to her and what it caused her to do and to say. While these things

The “Other” Woman

may not be as titillating as speculating about her marital history, I think we’ll find them ultimately far more important and helpful.

Let’s begin by jumping two verses back from where the lectionary starts this passage this morning. In verse three of John, chapter 4, we read, “(Jesus) left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria.” The district of Samaria was not a place that any Jew went willingly. It was “the wrong side of the tracks” but exponentially worse. When I was a boy growing up in the South, there were certain parts of many of the towns that I or my relatives lived in where I was warned not to go. Generally, these were colloquially named derisively with the then-common epithet for African-Americans, “N*****town.” In Kirkwood, the suburb of St. Louis where I spent my pre-teen and teenaged years, this neighborhood was called Meacham Park. The kids from Meacham Park went to school with me from 5th grade on but although they were my classmates, they were never my friends. I was never invited to their homes, their parties or their churches, or vice-versa. It was a world apart and we all understood why.

Relations between the Jews and the Samaritans were very like those Southern relationships between Black and White, perhaps it was the same in Northern cities as well but I didn’t grow up in them, so I can’t say. There was also a racial component to the divide between Jews and Samaritans. Samaria was named for its largest city, which had been the capital of Israel, the northern half of what had once been a united kingdom under David and Solomon. When the Assyrians defeated Israel in about 722 BCE, they deported the vast majority of the inhabitants and replaced them with the population of other states they’d conquered, a common practice of theirs to demoralize conquered peoples and keep them subdued. So the Samaritans were ethnically different from the Jews or, worse, they were the product of intermarriage between the remnant of the 10 northern tribes and the forcibly introduced outsiders. As we know from relatively recent U.S. history, no one is hated more or treated worse than “half-breeds” or mulattos. After seven hundred years, the Jews still maintained their racial animosity against the Samaritans.

As the woman says to Jesus, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” The evangelist adds in an aside, “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.” In other words, you don’t share a cup with those people. Have I told here the story of how, when I was about four, I travelled with my mom from our home in Clearwater, Florida, to her family’s home in Bald Knob, Arkansas, by Greyhound bus? I remember being very upset with her at one bus station where we stopped because she wouldn’t let me drink out of the fun water fountain. I knew it must have rainbow water because the sign above it said, “Colored.” That’s what that meant, right? You don’t drink out of their well, you don’t go swimming where they do, don’t let them in your schools, don’t let them date your sister. That was the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Samaritans were “other.”

The Samaritan woman herself appears to raise another major issue of dispute between the Jews and the Samaritans: they were religiously “other.” “Sir,” she says, “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.” The Samaritans practiced what the Temple priests and scribes in Jerusalem considered an adulterated form of Judaism. Rather than limiting sacrifices to the Temple on

The “Other” Woman

Mount Zion in Jerusalem, they practiced them on Mount Gerizim in Samaria and in other “high places.” They also used a variation of the Torah books of the Jews but none of the other writings or books of the prophets. The Samaritans claimed that it was their southern neighbors who’d gone astray, altering their religion during the Babylonian exile. Regardless of who was in the right, it was as deadly a religious divide as any of those known between Catholics and Protestants or any of Christendom’s other sectarian squabbles.

The point at which this comes up in the story has puzzled most preachers and commentators who have regarded it as an attempt to change the subject by the woman immediately after Jesus has revealed the truth about her marital status. But this may, in fact, be incorrect. The story of the arrival of the disparate tribes who became the Samaritans is told in II Kings 17, and I’m indebted to my friend Kathleen Kichline and her book, Sisters in Scripture, for this insight. Beginning in verse 29 we read, “But every nation still made gods of its own and put them in the shrines of the high places that the people of Samaria had made, every nation in the cities in which they lived; the people of Babylon made Succoth-benoth, the people of Cuth made Nergal, the people of Hamath made Ashima; the Avvites made Nibhaz and Tartak; the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim. They also worshiped the Lord and appointed from among themselves all sorts of people as priests of the high places, who sacrificed for them in the shrines of the high places. So they worshiped the Lord but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away. To this day they continue to practice their former customs.” Now, if you were keeping count, there were five tribes named there with their gods, in addition to Yahweh. Two weeks ago at “Soup, Salad & Soul,” we talked about a tradition in the Bible of referring to Israel as God’s bride and, sadly, often as God’s adulterous bride for their propensity to turn away and worship other gods. It may well be that what caused the woman at the well to refer to Jesus as a prophet was not his uncanny knowledge of her personal history but rather his reference to the religious history of her people: they had had five “husbands” and the one they now claimed as “husband,” Yahweh, they were worshipping incorrectly. He was not really their husband. This is very much in the tradition of the prophet Hosea who was instructed by God to name his son “Not my people,” “for,” God said, “you are not my people and I am not your God.”

So, the Woman at the Well may not have been a shady lady but she was ethnically and religiously “other.” And shady or not, she was a lady and not one of Jesus’ family, which meant that he should not have been speaking to her, much less have initiated conversation with her. Her gender alone made her “other” in that culture. Verse 27 of John 4 tells us that Jesus’ disciples “were astonished that he was speaking with a woman.” That cultural taboo meant no more to him than did the barriers of race and religion.

In fact, if you remove the harsh note of the apparent accusation of serial monogamy and infidelity (“you’ve had five husbands and now you’re living in sin with some other man, hussy”), this episode could almost be read as a flirtatious sort of courtship. We’re not as quick to pick up on it as John’s original audience would have been but the evangelist sets this whole story up as a sort of romance. The woman reminds Jesus that their common ancestor, Jacob, had dug that well and Jacob began his romance with Rachel at a well just as his father’s proposal to Rebekah had been delivered at a well. And the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman can certainly be read as the kind of bantering between a man and a woman that often covers for

The “Other” Woman

amorous intent. Last weekend, Connie and I were with Kit and his girlfriend, Olivia, who own a pair of cats they’ve named Beatrice and Benedick. If you are not familiar with the allusion, B and B are the sparring lovers in Shakespeare’s “Much Ado About Nothing,” a comedy which Connie and I saw on our trip to London three summers ago. That production starred a pair of actors who’d recently played sassy but platonic friends on a certain popular science fiction series on the BBC, what’s it called, oh, yes, “Doctor Who.” Benedick was played by David Tennant, the Tenth Doctor, and Beatrice was his erstwhile companion, “Donna Noble,” played by Catherine Tate. Tennant was outstanding; Tate, not as good. If you really want to see a fine Beatrice and Benedick, see the 1993 all-star film adaption with Emma Thompson and her then-husband, Kenneth Branagh. Or, watch “The Thin Man” with Nick and Nora Charles played by William Powell and Myrna Loy. Or the 1980’s TV series, “Moonlighting,” with Bruce Willis and Cybill Shepherd as David & Maddie. You get the idea.

So, perhaps, rather than a supernatural exposure of a sinful life, we have Jesus indulging in a peculiar flirtation with this “other” woman, someone who should be taboo to him by reason of gender, race, and religion. But rather than offering her marriage, he offers her “living water... gushing up to eternal life.” Rather than critiquing the way that she and her countrymen worship, he points out that neither the Samaritans nor the Jews have it exactly right and invites her to a new relationship with God, the One whom he called “Father,” a relationship not of fear and of sacrifice but of spirit and truth. In her response, “I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us,” it is not hard to hear the note of longing, of praying for the same consummation for which the Jews awaited, of a hope that only just dared to raise itself.

Is it any wonder then, when this gentle, teasing man who saw straight to her most cherished hope, the hope for herself and her people and their neighbors to all live in peace and in God’s Kingdom, when he announced himself as the one for whom they’d been waiting that she ran straight back to Sychar to gather her neighbors? As I mentioned, in the Orthodox Church, she has been called “Equal to the Apostles” because of this act of bringing so many of her neighbors to Jesus. She has also been given a name by tradition: Photina, or in Russian, Svetlana, the luminous one. So deeply had she drunk from Jesus’ living water, so influenced by him was she that she glows in the eyes of memory and legend. You might say, she was on fire.

What then do we, a congregation seeking re-kindling, learn from this story of the one who was the Light of the World and the woman he set on fire? To begin with, I hope that we are reminded that it is not our place to exclude anyone from the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus and the companionship of the Holy Spirit, especially as made manifest in the Body of Christ known as the Church. Taboos of race and religion and gender should not affect our sense of hospitality and welcome or our offer of friendship. We are not called to judge others but to extend God’s love to them and to show God’s light to them, to guide them, as best we can, to the streams of living water. We should not be dissuaded by barriers of nationality or politics or theology or lack thereof. All persons who come into our lives should be welcomed with a winsome humor and the charm that we would extend to someone we deeply wanted to impress.

In doing those things, we would be following the example of Jesus in this story but it is just as important that we follow the example of Photina. When confronted by the truth, she opened herself to it gladly, as should we. And when she became convinced that she had tapped into the

The “Other” Woman

living water, she rushed off to share it with her friends. We have many ways of doing this. We can tell the story of what we have found and how we have been blessed, just as Photina did. We don't have the privilege of bringing people to the well to meet Jesus in the flesh and hear him speak. Your pastor is a pretty poor substitute. But we have a whole congregation here of people who have followed Jesus for decades and who have built up a considerable store of knowledge about what walking in his Way is all about. If you have friends or family who aren't pursuing that Way, I encourage you to take the example of Photina and to bring them to the well where you are nourished. Or we can go out to new places, as the legend says Photina did when she travelled from Samaria to Rome to carry the good news of Jesus and we can teach those we find. One of our brothers, Jules Butler, is leaving next week for Haiti, not necessarily to preach but to tell of the love of God in his actions, in his work to help build a school and other tasks, ministering to the Haitians in their place of need. Jules is going to a people from whom we in the United States have been separated by those taboos of otherness – by race, especially, and by religion, and by economics. But following the example of Jesus, he goes nonetheless. There are many ways to carry the love of Jesus, the living water, to those who are parched with thirst. Jesus is sending us to reap that for which we did not have to labor. But first, our own cups must be full; first our own fires must be lit. Let us pray, as we sing, that we may be made whole so that we may share that wholeness with others. Amen.