

*Re-membered by the Light*  
*John 4:1-42*

This story has long been a favorite. A fairly common understanding of this encounter between Jesus and this Samaritan woman goes something like this: The woman goes to the well in the heat of the day, alone, because she's on the margins of her community. She's been ostracized because she's had five husbands and isn't married to the current man in her life. But Jesus, the liberator and liberal and feminist that he is, ignores all the social boundaries that would keep him from talking to a woman, a Samaritan, and a sexually loose woman, not only talking to her, but even asking her for a drink.

Does this sound about right?

And then I read Amy Jill Levine's book, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*. I'm going to leave the Samaritan woman and Jesus at the well for a bit and share some of Levine's book, because I think it matters, not only for how we read this story, but for how we read the Bible.

Levine is Professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt. She herself is Jewish.

In her book, Levine places Jesus into his historical context, refuting the notion that he's an exception in his Jewish community. She argues that much of our reading and interpretation comes with anti-Jewish assumptions. Christians especially make broad and unfounded claims about the Jewish faith, and invariably the claims are invalid. As I read Levine's book, I am humbled again and again to see that indeed, I am reading with an anti-Jewish bias. She writes about how commentators talk about the legalism and burden of Jewish law, being harsh and judgmental of it. But we live in a country that has way more laws than the Jewish legal codes that we follow and for the most part, we're not particularly burdened by them. And may not even notice most of them. Another common accusation we bring is that Jewish law lacks compassion, that Pharisees, for example, are so intent on following the

law that they cannot have compassion for those in need. Again, Levine argues that compassion and the law are absolutely compatible. She cites biblical passages and writings from the *Mishnah* and *Talmud* that place compassion at the forefront of the law.

In the story of Jesus with the Samaritan, Levine argues that there is no evidence in the story itself that says this woman is a social outcast. Or that she's a sinner. Quoting Levine:

The poor wife is unfortunate, but she is not sinful. Concerning the multiple married Samaritan, by living with a man not her husband, she violates no legal code. Jesus never says to her anything about her sinful behavior and no one in the story seeks to stone her. The only ones who condemn her are the biblical scholars.

When we bring an anti-Jewish reading and add things to the story that aren't there, we miss the details that *are* there. For example, Levine points out that the woman comes to the well at noon whereas Nicodemus in the story just before this one, came at midnight. This is a woman of light, she sees and understands the light that Jesus brings, unlike Nicodemus who remains in the dark.

Bringing our anti-Jewish judgments, we also miss the significance of meeting at a well. Levine says that early listeners and readers of this story would immediately have made associations with a well. The courting rituals of Rebekah and Isaac happened around a well. And Moses met his wife, one of 7 daughters who came to a well to draw water.

A last anti-Jewish bias I'll point out is the way we understand the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. Levine argues that the relationship isn't one-sided, it isn't Jews hating and discriminating against Samaritans. Rather, the hostility is mutual, an old, old rivalry.

I'm going to pause here. This kind of teaching is perhaps better suited for a Bible study than a sermon. But given this congregation's commitment to ending racism, and given our relationship with Suheil and Hanni in Gaza, it seems important that we let the Light of Epiphany shine so we can see our anti-Jewish interpretations of biblical stories.

I confess that while reading her book has been very enlightening, I also sometimes find myself annoyed. It's hard to give up the story of a radical Jesus rescuing a socially outcast woman. What then, is left for us to do with this story? Well, it turns out there is *lots* in this story! The Light that is shining in the world is shining through every detail!

And perhaps that's a first thing to "come and see." It's noon. The sun is at its peak when the woman comes to the well. The Gospel writer wants us to hear this story alongside the story of Nicodemus. Two encounters with Jesus, one at night and the other in the day; one a man, a Pharisee and the other a woman, a Samaritan. In the encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus is talking about humans born, or created as flesh-ed and spirit-ed beings. And about trusting the Wind of the Spirit as She moves in and through our lives. Nicodemus never quite saw the light in Jesus' words...coming in the dark and leaving in the dark. In contrast, the woman at the well is receptive when Jesus starts talking about living water. In the bright light of the noonday sun, she "sees" what Jesus is saying and readily engages him. The encounter is so enlivening and invigorating that she leaves the well to tell her neighbors about Jesus. They, in turn, are so taken with what she shares that they invite Jesus to stay with them.

Nicodemus and the woman aren't opposites. It isn't that one is good and right and the other bad and wrong. There are times when our encounters with Jesus need time. The darkness can be a fertile place of waiting, holding, of being broken open. A full day includes darkness *and* light.

Another detail to see is that this encounter takes place at a water source. Remembering that John's Gospel story is a re-telling of the Genesis story, we hear this detail through the creation story. In our imagination, we're likely seeing a well that's been dug out of the ground. But it could also be a spring of water. It's the same word we hear in Genesis 2:6, "a

stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground....” With that creation image in mind, listen again to v 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.” Jesus is re-storying the Garden of Eden! It’s here. Now. Jesus may be tired and the woman may need water in her bucket, but for now, living water is flowing through them and between them and overflowing into her community!

Another detail that adds to this creation story, or re-story, is the time. Our translations read that it takes place at noon. (As I’ve said a bunch of times.) We’ve already noted that the time of day says something about the enlightenment of the woman. Another piece of this detail is that the Greek word for “noon” literally means “sixth hour.” By adding this detail, might John be recalling the end of creation, when “God saw everything...and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the *sixth* day” (1:31)? Creator God rested after 6 days and here is Jesus, resting at the 6<sup>th</sup> hour. With these carefully painted details in his story, John is giving us an image of creation, a moment of completion and fullness that is flowing with mutuality and reciprocity, living water overflowing into bodies and beings, into relationship and neighborhoods.

We’ve already noted several courtships that took place at a well. This encounter between Jesus and the woman may not be a typical courtship, but remembering Rebecca’s and Isaac’s encounter at a well, and Moses meeting his wife at a well, there’s something here for us to pay attention to. Notice their conversation. They’re talking, back and forth about giving and receiving water, about drawing from each other’s wells. We begin to hear sexual innuendos of creativity and energy. This is a generative, life-giving conversation. We see the aliveness of God’s Spirit breathing into this man and woman, male and female. A conversation and a

meeting that multiplies. Families and communities grow and expand when living water flows freely.

There are a few more details to “come and see.” When the woman comes to the water where Jesus is resting, he opens the conversation by saying, “Give me a drink.” Not even a “please”! Just, “Give me a drink.” Jesus appears completely dependent. He’s waiting on the disciples for food. And he needs someone to give him water. As we keep looking at this scene, we begin to see that it mirrors an ancient scene of the people in the wilderness saying to Moses, “Give us water to drink” (Exo 17). Here is the son of God, the son of Humanity, the Word-made-flesh asking for water. There’s a humility and an honesty in his asking. Without shame, Jesus asks for water, opening up a flow that had been shut down, closed up. He asks for water and living water gushes between them.

There is one more detail to share about noon and asking for a drink. (And just to say, once I started looking at details, I couldn’t stop seeing!) At the end of John’s Gospel, when Pilate releases Jesus to be executed...it’s noon (19:14). From the cross, he says, “I am thirsty” (19:28) and is given a bitter drink. When there is no opening, when instead of living water we offer bitter drinks, the spark of life, the light within is extinguished. And yet, on the cross, it is the 6<sup>th</sup> hour...the day is not over.

*Pause*

I don’t know how all these details and pieces fit into this story. But I trust them. I trust John’s eyewitness account of Jesus. Just as it is mysterious and miraculous that we are born of flesh and born of spirit, it is also a mystery and a miracle that we drink living water. What we must not miss in this encounter is the power and aliveness of the living water that Jesus is talking about and offering. “[T]hose 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.*”

We get to see the gushing water in the conversation between Jesus and this unnamed woman. She already sees and lives in the light. She's already confident in her body and spirit. So when Jesus asks her for a drink, she immediately engages him. And their conversation flows from there. They follow the energy of the water and while Jesus was the thirsty one, she's the one reaching deep into the spring and drinking. And the living water keeps gushing until she herself is overflowing. And she runs back to her village, to her people, and shares it with her community. And it just keeps gushing, so much so that they invite Jesus, the outsider, the rival, the "other," to stay with them. And he does, for two days.

And then another image emerges. The ancient rivalry between siblings is washed away by the force of the flowing water. And what rises up are friends. In this creation, the oldest rivalries...between Cain and Abel, between Esau and Jacob, between Jews and Samaritan...the rivalries are healed. Living water...flowing from the face of the ground...gushing into the depths of our being...has the power to wash away all the gunk and debris that's accumulated over lifetimes.

What a miraculous encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman! From their meeting, we see a new creation. This is what is possible when we open ourselves...letting Christ, the Living Water...flow into us and through us.

May we open ourselves to the flow of Living Water...

May Living Water flow into us...through us...and carry us into the new creation that Jesus, the Christ, offers.

May it be so.