

Prophets in Our Midst
from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Reading: John 4:5-26

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It is remarkable how Jesus was able to muster patience with all sorts of people who were, essentially, resistant to his ministry. People were interested but didn't really want to get cornered by him. That is what was going on with Nicodemus in the encounter we looked at last week. A successful lawyer, a member of the highest council, the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus is curious about Jesus but he resists being put in a position of expressing faith in him as Messiah.

We see the same kind of resistance in this woman in today's text. She even goes so far as to imply that he could be a messiah but she never moves to the point of declaring him to be *God with us, the promised one, the Savior of the world.*

It may occur to you that little has changed. Just in the community of people we associate with the wider church there are varieties of faith development. We are often at very different levels of faith maturity and different levels of curiosity about what Christians say they believe. Nicodemus and this Samaritan woman are rather familiar to us when you think about it. Hardly a week goes by that I don't meet someone like them with serious questions about what we believe coupled with an armor plate-like protection to keep out any new idea or claim of faith that might threaten to penetrate their resistance.

If you are seen as one who is active in a church it is often assumed that you can answer questions about the faith that are similar to this Samaritan woman's questions of Jesus: Where can I find the path to faithfulness? Where is food and drink for the soul to be found? What is your angle on eternal life?

I have had many a good evening at someone's dinner table go south when the question time began. It is an occupational liability for me but I'll bet it has happened to you also once someone found out you might have a word of wisdom to impart. You become the object of an interrogation about all things religious or political or whatever your field may be.

I may have told you about a conversation on the porch of a lovely B and B overlooking Eggemoggin Reach in Maine. We had finished dinner and were enjoying coffee when a young man who was there alone that evening asked me what I do for work when not on vacation. (This is always a dangerous transitional

moment. A smart move would be to change the subject but I proceeded to answer his question to which he replied, “I don’t have much use for organized religion.”

I should have excused myself right then but, instead, I took the bait. I could have replied, “Okay then, how do you feel about unorganized religion? We have an abundance of that these days.” It was about this time that I noticed how the others in my party had left the porch to go inside while I began to dig my way to Jerusalem with a small shovel.

The amazing thing about these encounters is that you and I could really be helpful if the other person would just let us. It’s like being asked about your favorite city, a place you grew up in, by someone who is going to be visiting there soon. But as you provide information it quickly becomes clear that the person just wants to tell you all he or she has read about the city in the guide books. The potential traveler doesn’t want any supplemental information no matter how personal and accurate and helpful it might be. And you would be justified in wondering, “So why are we having this conversation?”

In a commentary on John’s Gospel Professor Fred Craddock writes that this Samaritan woman at the well is so absorbed in her daily routine of filling jars of water while being frustrated with this non-satisfying routine that there is no way she is going to see or hear the unique perspective that Jesus offers. He may know about her several husbands and her life in

the world but it is no sign to her of his prophetic powers. She just figures he must have sources like a good journalist does.

Note, however, that she is really a red herring. Like a figure in a good mystery that takes our attention for awhile we focus on her until we realize she is never going to understand who is with her. Meanwhile there is this cast of town people on the margins, in the shadows and the wings who are worthy of our attention. They recognize who he is, a prophet in their midst. They ask Jesus to “abide” with them for awhile. Such an invitation “to abide” is the ultimate signal in their culture that they find him both interesting and prophetic. They are eager to learn from him and show little resistance. Jesus stayed with them for two days. We hear these Samaritan town people acknowledge Jesus as not only promised Messiah but Savior of the world (v.42), no less, in the verses that follow our text. “As such”, says Dr. Craddock, “he embraces and is embraced by Jewish believers, Samaritan believers, all believers.”¹

II

Why are we so resistant to God’s presence among us, especially when we claim to be people who say that God with us is a comforting thought? Why are we like a host or hostess who, in effect says, “Yes, come on in. Dinner is almost ready. We’ve been expecting you. But don’t get any ideas about spending the night in the guest room.” (After all, we may think to ourselves, we’re not looking for a new best friend).

¹ Fred Craddock, John, Knox Preaching Guides, (John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1982) p. 37.

I have had conversations with faithful people who have told me how much comfort their faith has been to them when tragedy struck and it seemed the veil of sadness would never lift. And I have heard the same people later go on to tell me how, from time to time, they visit a medium with a crystal ball in the hope of making contact beyond the grave with a dead family member. We say we live by faith that Jesus is the Savior and yet we carry a card with the Ace of Spades in our pocket as a backup. That isn't living by faith. That's living by the things we think we can control. It is living in the mistaken assumption that we know better than God what we need for abundant living.

Again and again we see a pattern emerging when the gospels present ordinary people like you and me meeting Jesus. It isn't long before they realize that they are in over their heads, beyond their comfort zone, beginning to walk out on a narrow beam high above the familiar ground below. We might even hear them saying, "I know what you say is right. I'm just not ready to join you in that affirmation." This is what the Samaritan woman does. She says, "I know the Messiah is coming." But there is no commitment from her that she will confirm how the one standing before her can change her life forever. She is not prepared to make a declaration of faith. She is resistant. She is argumentative. She prefers familiar turf. Even when Jesus says to her, "I am he", she will not make the move to live by faith. She maintains control and misses out on the gifts of God.

It seems like such an unbalanced exchange in market terms, doesn't it. Yet we see it and hear it and experience it ourselves every day. It is as though someone has offered us the keys to the kingdom—not only of Heaven but the keys to the kingdom of self-understanding, of finding the power within ourselves to act with courage, to forgive those we currently resent, and to reach out to those we fear. Jesus offers us the keys to finding the all-embracing love of God we say we seek. Why do we, time and time again, deprive ourselves of what we know we want and need from God? We can make a list. Near the top would have to be fear, fear of intimacy with God and with those who know God. Another would have to be resistance to giving up what we consider to be the “control of our lives.” And yet another would be fear of losing our identity in the identity that is God's.

Here is the great irony of our living by faith: As we approach the throne of grace we turn and run the other way out of fear that we will be swallowed up by the very God we seek. Well, of course we will be swallowed up by love. Of course the old self will give way to a new self. Of course the power of sin that ruled our lives will be snuffed out by the power of love. That is what giving yourself in faith is all about. Becoming a new creation is a frightening move for any of us.

The Samaritan woman says, not really understanding what the words mean, “Oh sir, give me this living water for then I will never be thirsty again.” Little does she realize that the thirst

Jesus offers to assuage is the very need that keeps her so unfulfilled, though she is at Jacob's well every day. The metaphor is lost on her. She is a captive to her literally confining life. She is a captive of her routine, her controlled existence. A prophet of God is before her and she thinks he is a wise worker, a man who knows about wells.

Before we leave this woman at the well let us realize that in her stubbornness she has served a purpose for others. As we look at her and see ourselves we have the opportunity to move beyond the resistance that kept her a captive of her predictable ways. If her example serves to cause us to seek a word with the Lord of life then she has served a purpose. Even if she never finds the promised living water we can, as many before us have. Living by faith is the way to new discovery about God and about self.