

A Well Story

A sermon for the Third Sunday in the Lent

Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

What happens this morning at Jacob's well is just one of several "well stories" from the Bible that eventually turn into "love stories" from the Bible. Maybe you remember some of these "well stories" turned "love stories."

In Exodus 2, a Hebrew boy, on the run from an Egyptian Pharaoh, meets an exotic girl at a well in Midian just east of Egypt. Remember, Moses met Zipporah while she and her sisters were fetching water for their father's flock. When some young shepherds came and chased the girls away, Moses, like a real gentleman, came to the rescue and even watered his future father-in-law's sheep for the seven lovely sisters. When the girls' father heard about the Egyptian hero, he decided to give one of his daughters to Moses in marriage. A Jewish boy meet an exotic girl, and a love story is sure to follow.

Something similar happens much earlier in Genesis 29 when Jacob, fleeing for *his* life, stops at a well in the country of his ancestors, "the people of the east," and, at "high day," meets his future wife, Rachel while she is watering *her* father's sheep. See, a Jewish boy meets a not-so-exotic girl at a well, and a love story is sure to follow.

What happens this morning at Jacob's well between Jesus and the Samaritan woman all begins in Genesis 24 when Abraham sends a servant off to the old country to find a wife for Isaac. The servant comes to a well in the city of Nahor where he meets Rebecca, future wife of Isaac, who just happens to be his second cousin.

In the "well-story-turned-love-story" which we have before us this morning, the Jewish rabbi Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at the well where "Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud." But, of course, we all know that there can be no romance going at this well, that there will be no "love story" this time around in this "well story." Well, maybe we'd better take a closer look. After all, this is the longest recorded conversation that Jesus has with anyone anywhere. He talks longer with this foreign woman than he does with any one of his disciples, any one of his accusers, even any one of his own family.

You may also have noticed some peculiarities about this very long conversation. Number one, Jesus is alone at the well. You would expect that at least one of the disciples would have stayed to keep him company; but no, all twelve of them need to traipse off to buy lunch.

Number two, we read that Jesus conveniently forgot his little leather bucket and rope which any sensible traveler in that part of the world would have used to draw water from a well. So, if Jesus is going to get a drink, he will have to depend on someone else to give it to him. You see how the story is getting set-up.

Number three, and perhaps most peculiar, is that Rabbi Jesus initiates a conversation with a woman, and not just any woman, but a Samaritan woman, something truly scandalous and taboo at the time. In Jesus' day, women were not even allowed to worship with men, whose morning devotions included the prayer, "Thank God that I am not a woman." Women were not to be seen or heard in

public, especially not by holy men who refused to speak even to their own wives in public. In fact, one pious group of men was known as “the bruised and bleeding Pharisees” because they closed their eyes when they saw a woman coming down the street, even if it meant banging into a wall and bloodying their noses. But, not only is she a she, the woman at the well is also a Samaritan which, as far as the Judeans were concerned, made her not only a half-breed but a full-pagan. To make matters even worse, not only is she a she and a Samaritan, she is also a woman “with a past” as we used to say. Respectable women came to the well in the mornings and the evenings while it was still cool when they could greet each other and talk about the daily news, no doubt, including the latest escapades of this woman. The fact that she comes to the well at noon was a sure sign that the woman was probably not welcome at the morning meeting of the Riverside District #96 PTA.

As Jesus could clearly see, the woman had been married almost as many times as Zsa Zsa Gabor who holds the record in Hollywood at nine. So, the woman must have been very surprised when she comes in the heat of the day and sees a strange man sitting alone beside the well with no water pouch. She sees his olive skin, his dark eyes, his strong nose; and she perceives that he is no Samaritan but a Judean. And we figure this has to be *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* all over again. Utterly taboo. Socially unacceptable. Downright scandalous.

“How dare you, a Judean, ask me, a Samaritan woman for a drink?” And just to make sure that we get the point, the narrator of John says that Judeans and Samaritans have a past about as shameful and painful as black and white in America. Judeans and Samaritans have a shared history, a shared ancestry, a shared religion, and yet so many centuries of bad blood between them that they can’t even go to church together.

So, the stage is set for scandal and intrigue at Jacob’s well. The Word that became flesh will go anywhere and cross every boundary to reveal itself. But, of course, we all know that there could be no romance going on at this well, that there could be no wedding in the making at this well. However, this is John’s Gospel, and we remember that it all began with a wedding at Cana in Galilee, chapter 2, when water was changed to wine. After all, John the Baptist has just rung the wedding bells in chapter 3 when he calls himself the best man for the bridegroom who will soon appear.

You see, this story, with its “living water,” was likely used by the early church at baptisms. Here in Samaria, as at baptism, Jesus is crossing major barriers to reach this woman, which would suggest that in Holy Baptism there *is* a marriage taking place—a love story between Christ and his bride the Church—a marriage which eventually will include both Jews and Samaritans as well as us Gentiles. Martin Luther speaks of baptism as “a joyful exchange” between Christ and his bride the Church when he writes that “The third incomparable benefit of faith is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh [Ephesians 5:31-32]. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage . . . it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly, the believing soul can boast about and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were his own . . .”

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The “well story” of Jesus and the Samaritan woman turns out to be a “love story” after all. For only One who loves you truly knows you as you are and not as you pretend to be. Only One who loves you knows your deepest desires. Only One who loves you can look at your past without batting an eye.

Curiously, in John’s Gospel, the crucifixion happens at “high day,” and once more Jesus asks for a drink. With this drink, given him on the cross, Jesus’ marriage to humanity is complete.

“For while we were still weak,” Christ died with us in our wilderness, that we might be one with him and he with us, one flesh, joined in this life and whatever life might come after this, “for richer or poorer, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, so long as...,” well, so long as he lives and reigns with the Father and Holy Spirit.—*djl*