

Sermon on John 4:5-42 – *A Holy Conversation*
Third Sunday in Lent, March 19, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

A few people have wondered, and asked me why I'm preaching today. Shouldn't I take a Sunday off, so soon after my father died? Or at least invite someone else to preach? For we do have several excellent pastors here who would gladly step in, if I asked them. I am grateful for that. But I guess I'd have to say that there is nothing that is more important or healing to me right now than to have this "holy conversation" with you. For that's what it is – *a holy conversation* – when you and I share in the proclamation of the gospel: the good news of God's truth of love for the world. Today we explore a holy conversation that Jesus had with one of the most unlikely persons you could imagine – a woman from Samaria – which broke down ancient barriers of hatred and religious bigotry that had existed for centuries. A holy conversation such as this is sorely needed today! Life is too short to leave important words unsaid or to have holy conversations – as I was reminded this past week, when my family sat with my father as he died. So, with thanks to Lutheran scholar Susan Briehl for her study of John's gospel, let's hear what Jesus and this woman from Samaria had to say to each other.

Now, last week we met a man named Nicodemus, in another holy conversation with Jesus. It was a whole different context. Nicodemus was a man, an important religious leader – a Pharisee, a teacher of God's law, a scholar of the Torah. He was also a respected "insider". He had questions about Jesus' teachings about the Law that he didn't understand, and wanted some answers. So in order to not be seen by others, who were more hostile to Jesus' challenging teachings, Nicodemus came at night, a time which was customary for Hebrew scholars to study Torah – alone, and in secret. In this conversation, Jesus challenged Nicodemus with a concept he couldn't grasp – being "born again" – and left him with another bold, challenging truth about God: *that God loved the world so much that he gave God's only Son, so that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life – sending the Son not to condemn the world, but so that all the world would be saved through him.* Too much to comprehend, perhaps. So Nicodemus left alone, back into the night – and we don't know if he shared his conversation with anyone else. John doesn't say.

In contrast, the woman in today's story is not named; she is merely introduced as a woman from Samaria. To the Judeans, she is a religious, political, and ethnic *outsider*. She was no respected scholar like Nicodemus – but while Nicodemus was thoroughly confused by just one concept about being reborn through faith, this woman engaged Jesus in a deep, theological conversation about

water – the longest in the entire gospel! Jesus met her outside, in the noonday sun, by the community well – Jacob’s well - which was the usual place for people to meet – except no one else was there at the time. Perhaps nobody else wanted to talk with her – as she was someone who had been married five times before, living with someone who was not her husband (you know how some of us “religious folks” can be when someone lives outside of society’s expectations).

It all started with the simplest of questions. Jesus asked the woman to give him something to drink. It was noon, and he was thirsty. She was simply shocked that he had asked her – she answered with a question: “*You are a Judean, and you are talking to ME, a WOMAN, from SAMARIA?*” Three incomprehensible barriers right there: he was a well-know rabbi, and she was a “nobody”. She was also a woman, and men would not address or converse with a woman outside the family, except for business. On top of it all, he was a Jew and she was a Samaritan, who had been in a religious “feud” for centuries, ever since the Babylonian exile.

Judeans considered Samaritans ritually “unclean” – like corpses, lepers, and menstruating women. No Judean would risk sharing a cup of water with a woman who would make him also unclean, unworthy to stand before God. Why? Samaritans were considered ritually “impure” – descended from Israelites who had not been deported at the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. Samaritans had refused to help restore the Holy City of Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile, and they had colluded with Syria in their wars against Israel. Judeans could not count on Samaritans in time of war or restoration, so walls of political mistrust and hostility were built that lasted for centuries. When Jesus came to Samaria, there were many walls which had been created between them – though they shared the same Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), Samaritans did not regard the books of the prophets as scripture, Jews and Samaritans worshiped God on different holy mountains. Jews looked for a Messiah from the house of David and Samaritans looked for another savior like Moses to come. This doesn’t sound so terribly crucial to us today, but Judeans and Samaritans each saw each other as heretical, and built walls around themselves to defend their claims about God. Could it be much different from the claims of heresy that we Christians make about other Christians from other denominations today, or people of other faiths? Building walls around ourselves and between differing beliefs and peoples is far too common a trait among humans. It’s one of our original sins, I’m afraid.

So what was it about this conversation that draws us back to read it again and again? Surely, it starts with the surprise that Jesus so easily crossed this age-old barrier between peoples, and that he was talking theology with *a woman!* Rabbis didn’t speak with women in public – it just wasn’t done – but Jesus did. Surprise, surprise. And then, about her five husbands – what was that all about? We don’t know – maybe she had been widowed five times – which would make

her story very sad. Or perhaps she had been divorced five times. Could it have been for not bearing a son? Who knows? It's only speculation – and we humans *love to speculate* about other humans' problems, don't we? We make moral mountains out of such molehills. But Jesus just said it matter of factly, and went on to the deeper question.

Which was about the woman's real yearnings – not just about a thirst for water (a physical necessity), that had brought her to this well in the first place. It was for that deeper longing, which Jesus saw in her, for acceptance among her people, to feel that someone truly loved her for who she was – a child of God – and maybe even for barriers to break down between her and others so that she could speak with them like a real human being!

Jesus addressed all of these things in his holy conversation. Did she come here just to drink water – and be thirsty again the next day? The water he came to give her was living water, enough for everyone, gushing up to eternal life. Drink from him and you will never be thirsty again! She asked him challenging questions – like why “your people worship on one mountain and my people on another.” Who's right? Must we always worship apart, calling each other unclean? Jesus said it didn't matter which mountain people worship on – *the hour is coming when you[and I] will [all] worship God[as one] in spirit and in truth.*

Too soon the conversation was interrupted by the realities of life. When the disciples returned from getting food, they were astonished that Jesus was talking deep truth with a woman – and a Samaritan, of all people. They asked him to eat some real food – and Jesus said “*My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete God's work.*” It wasn't about getting lunch in the middle of the day! Jesus must have sighed. His own disciples had so much to learn! The woman carried her jar of water back to the city. But this is what she said “*Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?*” So the whole town of Samaritans believed in Jesus because of what this outcast woman testified to, and this conversation she had had with Jesus. And when they came to meet Jesus themselves, many more believed because of his words. It was a great testimony to the power in words of truth from God, and the gift of holy conversations!

Today we have so many barriers between one another in this world, don't we? Christians of different kinds, who cannot worship or commune together – not just Lutherans and Roman Catholics, but Lutherans against Lutherans! And then there are those more significant barriers that we create, between genders, sexual identities, political beliefs, ethnic backgrounds, language and culture. When they don't exist in reality, we even make them up! And when those walls go up, they have real life or death consequences in how people lived and are treated. We make some people outcasts by not allowing them a path to citizenship, without

documents or any legal process, and call them “illegal”. The consequences today that immigration officers intimidate or round up our neighbors without legal documents, put them in jails or cages, separate men from their families and women from their children, and create an atmosphere of fear and mistrust. We even talk about building a WALL along the border with Mexico, supposedly to keep dangerous terrorists out (when most people travel airport to airport) – the most ridiculous barrier wall ever conceived in human history. Hopefully we will come to our senses and it won’t happen, but I’m not counting on it. I saw the Berlin Wall when it was up – another ridiculous barrier with no positive purpose that caused a lot of pain and death. We humans love to build walls, until we find them too costly and too much a barrier to our own happiness. Then, with great regret, we may tear them down ourselves. But there is always another wall to build.

What Jesus offers you and me today is a new path, to cross those barriers we create between ourselves – in *holy conversations*. What would truly happen if you and I met in conversation with someone who believes differently – with a different faith, or language, gender or culture? Whose political belief is not exactly the same as ours? When we do this, the conversation is magical – it’s the only way for prejudices fall away, because we have to see one another as human beings. We don’t have to live in our own silos, separated by our own mountains of faith or politics – we can seek God and our common humanity in spirit and truth, and let those barriers come down.

When my family and I sat at my father’s bedside last week, while he was dying and unable to speak, we each had the opportunity to tell him whatever we wished to say. We didn’t have the time to say “we can say it next week”. So we could say “I love you”, and whatever else needed to be said. We had said these things before, but not so clearly and urgently. What if in our other relationships, we felt as free and urgent to say what is important?

We don’t have to wait until death, or times of crisis, to have holy conversations. You and I can have them right now. Jesus shows us the way, in this extraordinary, holy conversation with a woman that no one could have foreseen. Jesus shows us how to break down walls between each other, starting with as simple request as asking for a drink of water, or having a cup of coffee, and starting a holy conversation. Ultimately, this brought Jesus to the cross, where he brought down the greatest barrier of sin and death, and then rose again to bring life to the world.

Today we meet at this other well – this baptismal font – which is for us a spring of water that brings eternal life. But don’t take it from me, or my words. Come and see for yourself! For when you hear and experience it for yourself, you will know in spirit and in truth, that this Jesus is truly the Savior of the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.