



“UNLOVED

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

John 4: 1-26

March 8, 2026

There is a certain narrative parallel that exists between the encounter of Nicodemus and Jesus that we explored last week and that of Jesus and this Samaritan woman in the fourth chapter of John’s gospel. In both cases, you have an individual engaging with Jesus whom you might not anticipate would be among those engaging with Jesus, who then struggle to understand what it is that Jesus is saying, but who ultimately seem to emerge from the conversation with at least a spark of an enlivened faith emerging within them.

Nicodemus, of course, came to Jesus in the darkness of the night for reasons we explored last week. The Samaritan woman, on the other hand, comes to that well at the peak of the day – which is an intriguing detail in its own right that we will get to in a few minutes. Both find themselves extraordinarily limited by the worldly perspective they bring to the divine truths that Jesus is seeking to reveal. While Nicodemus couldn’t wrap his mind around the notion of being born a second time (a concept he took quite literally at first), the Samaritan woman gets all excited about this water that will forever quench her thirst because she thinks this means she won’t have to shlep that water to and from the well anymore. Still, in time, we see the faith of Nicodemus unfold as he comes cautiously to Jesus’ defense later in John and then arrives to assist in his burial upon Jesus’ death. And, the Samaritan woman? The verses that follow where we ended tell us that she was so excited by this encounter that she forgot her water jar and left it behind as she rushed off to tell others of what she’d discovered in this man named Jesus of Nazareth.

Two stories, two very similar narrative arcs, but one key detail that I think speaks volumes to the very manner in which we engage this world, and others in it, from each day to the next! In Nicodemus’ story, as a Pharisee, it was Nicodemus who, culturally and religiously, should not have been speaking to Jesus (arguably, that’s why he came in the darkness of the night). In the story of this Samaritan woman at the well, however, it was the other way around.

There’s a lot of conjecture about the woman who stands at the heart of this story, and I would argue that we don’t know as clearly what some suggest we know. Still, there are three key things that we do know about this woman that I think tie both of these stories together in a way that has a lot to say to those of us living in the culture, norms, and realities that surround us today.

We know, of course, that she was a Samaritan – and that’s not an inconsequential detail. Without getting into many faces and stages of the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans, it is imperative to note that there was no love lost between these groups. With religious and socio-political conflict that dated back for centuries, the Jews viewed the Samaritans as unclean, untouchable, and unworthy.

Not only was she a Samaritan, but she was a Samaritan woman. Now, there is plenty of evidence that, even in the patriarchal culture of the time, women played a role in many important moments of faith and life. It was women who discovered the empty tomb and rushed back to tell the others, and in this particular story this woman does a similar thing as she rushes off to share what she had seen in Jesus. Still, sitting one-on-one with a woman at the well – that’s a different thing. That would not have been something you’d expect to happen, and John tells us as much. In the very next verse after where we left off, John tells us that, “Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman.”

Strike one? She was a Samaritan. Strike two? She was a Samaritan woman? And strike three?

“You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband,’” Jesus says to her, “18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.” Now, this is where I’m not sure we know as much as some commentators and preachers often suggest. It is absolutely possible that this is a woman of some sort of ill-repute. She’s had a series of men in her life and is now with another who’s not her husband, and that raises some questions. It is also, however, possible that this was a reflection of her life’s circumstance. Did she keep outliving her husbands, passing from one to the next? Was this the reflection of failed marriages? Was it the result of some sort of Levitical marital code in which she kept being passed from one brother to the next? Was she so desperate to survive that she was grabbing hold of any man who’d support her in that patriarchal construct of the day? We don’t really know. What we do know, however, is that her circumstance – be it moral, socio-economic, or something else – would have relegated her to the lowest rungs on society’s ladders. Even the time of day – coming to that well at the peak of the noon-day heat instead of the cooler hours of morning or evening – raises questions of how she may have been seeking to avoid the contact (and in such the judgmental glares) of others. We don’t know all the detail, and any suggestion that we do includes some degree of conjecture. What we do know, however, is that this is not a woman who would have been seen to be worthy of the time and care of this teacher and prophet of the Jewish faith.

She was a Samaritan – strike one! She was a Samaritan woman – strike two! She was an individual of minimal societal standing or repute – strike three!

In the story of Nicodemus, it is Nicodemus – a Pharisee – who could/should/would not have likely been the one to make room for Jesus. Jesus represented so much of what the Pharisees objected to that Nicodemus’ approach of Jesus was way out of the norm. In the story of this Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, on the other hand, it is Jesus who could/should/would not have likely been the one to make room for her! And you could draw a lot from both cases. When I found myself exploring these two stories in successive weeks, however, what I found was that the act of making room for the ‘other’ is the act that ultimately led to new and enlivened faith. In the story of Nicodemus, it is his decision to be open to the thoughts of Jesus that led to

his new beginning. In the story of the Samaritan woman, it is Jesus' decision to take the time for that woman with three socio-religious strikes against her that led her to a new path in God.

In one case it is a man making room for Jesus, and in the other it is Jesus making room for that woman, but in both cases, it was the act of making room for the 'other' that led to new beginnings, and we live in a culture and time that seems to constantly and repeatedly urge us to do anything but that. While often unbeknownst to the users, computer algorithms consistently drive us in the direction of seeing and hearing only those voices that echo our own. Our social circles increasingly seem to center around political, religious and socio-cultural uniformity. I am constantly baffled by the manner in which 'cutting off' those who have a different perspective seems to be increasingly celebrated as some sort of a principled act of resistance. I'll never forget the day that I made some comment about a report I had seen on a certain 24-hour news channel, only to have my cousin reply, 'What are you doing watching that channel? Don't let your uncle find out!' Her comment was perhaps half in jest, but it was undeniably reflective of a deeper truth.

That's the world in which we live – a world in which norms, expectations, standards and even consumer media models are designed around the human tendency to segregate from anyone we perceive to be the 'other.' All the while, not only does the ministry and example of Jesus call us in another direction, but we have these specific narratives in which it is the distinct decision to make room for the 'other' that leads to new beginnings, new understandings, and new faith. Sometimes, as in the case of Nicodemus, making room for the other will lead to our own growth. Sometimes, as in the case of that Samaritan woman, making room for the other will lead to theirs. More often than not, it will be both/and. And yes, there are a lot other things that happened in these stories that led to these ends. In both cases, however, the fundamental decision that stands at the root of anything that follows is the decision that was made to make room to engage, to care for, and dare I say even bring love to, the 'other' that the world was saying was not worth their time. In a world that so often says the same to us, I wonder if/when/where/how we might follow that lead for their sake, for our sake, and for the sake of us all.