

Sermon on John 4: 1-26 Woman at the Well

Sisters and brothers,
what you heard in the reading from John's gospel is the story of a dialogue. A dialogue between two people who could not be more different from each other. However, the dialogue overcomes their boundaries.
Boundaries between human beings,
boundaries between men and women,
boundaries between cultures and nations,
boundaries set up by tradition, by religious law and by human small-mindedness.

In our story there is a man and a woman.
It is the man who makes the first contact by requesting: "Give me a drink."
And it is the woman who overcomes the boundary of nationality, tradition and religion between the two when she says: "...give me this water, so that I will never be thirsty again..."
This is no coincidence!
It is often women – well, in the New Testament it is often women – who overcome boundaries.
In the gospel of Mark, the Syrophenician woman is the first among all Gentiles to get in touch with Jesus when she pleads for the healing of her sick daughter.
In the book of acts it is Lydia, the business woman, who becomes the first Christian among all the Greeks.
And here in the gospel of John it is the woman of Samaria to whom Jesus first reveals himself. "I am the Messiah", he tells her – and she spreads the news far beyond the boundaries of the Jewish nation.

The hostility and the hatred between Samaritans and Jews was by all means more than a small disliking of each other. Over decades and centuries they had been living with a history of deep prejudice and terrible aggression against one another.
This phenomenon is not unknown to us, because such conflicts not only happen in the Middle East nor in the distant past. Many of us know tensions like this from our own life stories or from the life stories of ancestors or friends...
All in all: there is much conflict between those two groups of people, the Samaritans and the Jews, and there is much competition between their two religions and their places of worship.
Old and firm religious beliefs, and unsolvable political conflicts made it impossible for those two groups of the population to meet on common ground, accept each other and bring about reconciliation.

This is exactly the situation we find in the story of Jesus meeting the woman from Samaria. The story of those two talking to each other and sharing life and faith issues strikes a peaceful and tender sign against a cruel and dangerous reality!
In mysterious images of water and food, this story argues against hate and prejudice.
It is a soft protest in a harsh world, and this in three points:

Jesus meets a woman.
Man meets woman.
Scandalous in those times.

Jesus receives water and food.
Stranger fed by the enemy's hand.
Unimaginable then.

Jesus and the woman discuss theology.
The everyday issues of water and bread take on a greater dimension.
Two people learn from each other and both lives are changed.
...none of them will ever be the same again after this encounter at the well. The woman has tasted from the living water... And Jesus has experienced his horizon widening far beyond the Jewish world of his day.
Absolutely amazing.

Jesus and the Samaritan woman meet each other at the well – a water place being a common meeting place for so many stories in the Bible. It is the water place where Jacob meets Rachel. It is the water place where Hagar sees the angel. It is the water place where people experience friendship, support and sustenance.
Jesus and the Samaritan woman at their water place talk to each other...

And when the disciples return from the shops and the village, they are surprised, if not shocked by what they see. Man and woman? Jew and Gentile?
What on earth has Jesus in mind by talking with this woman? How could those two dare getting so close to each other?
The disciples don't have the wits to ask - no embarrassing questions please – but we all know what they think, especially in a situation which seems full of erotic hints and daring bonds...

Reading the story today, however, we know of course much more than the disciples could have known. We know how the extraordinary dialogue full of mysteries came about. And we know that it was Jesus who started the conversation about husbands and marriage, and not the woman in any way trying to prostitute herself. ...which is what the disciples may have assumed in the first place...

Many theologians have stated that Jesus criticizes this woman's way of life, but that is a false interpretation and a deep misunderstanding among theologians of many ages!
Jesus does not accuse or blame the woman's lifestyle at all.
She's had 5 husbands. Yes.
And she's not married to the man she is currently living with. But so what?!
Extraordinary life story. Okay!
But not at all a rare case in those days.
If you wanted to survive as a woman you had to have a man – husband or not.
The poorer you were, the less you could afford to get married.

Remarrying was what you had to do as a woman – for protection, survival and the minimal rights!

A woman alone didn't count for anything.

We don't know whether the five husbands died, or whether they divorced her – which was their right, had she not given birth to children, for example - but 5 marriages had surely made her so poor (in terms of dowry and such), that she simply couldn't afford to get married again.

So, forget everything that you may have learned about the terribly sinful Samaritan woman, and note from now on that she is merely a very, very poor woman.

And the little bit of erotic connotation that may have entered the story when she and Jesus talked about having husbands and not having them, disappears as soon as Jesus confirms to the woman that she's spoken the truth.

It is now clear: it is not a cheap date Jesus is after, but he wants to help this woman (and through her, to help her whole people) to meet the Messiah.

Since she is theologically well-educated, she'd heard of the Messiah and knew about his coming. She had hopes and expectations.

"When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us," she says. And now Jesus can freely and for the very first time in the gospel of John say: "I am He."

...how special, don't you think?

A simple telling place, a well in the middle of nowhere, and there the son of God and the son of Man reveals his true self for the first time... reveals it to an outsider, the enemy, a stranger.

The outsider understands.

The enemy becomes a friend.

And the stranger takes on the living water for which she doesn't even need a jar...

She leaves her jar behind and goes to tell the people whom she's met and how this has changed her life.

And when later in the story the disciples urge their master to eat from what they'd bought, Jesus is neither hungry nor thirsty anymore. (Did the woman actually give him something to drink? Or did she not? We must admit, we don't know and we will never know for sure...).

Jesus tells his friends about a food to eat about which they know nothing. He clearly indicates that there is far more to life than a filled stomach and a quenched thirst.

Life from now on is all about talking to each other, trusting each other, understanding each other and learning from each other.

It is all about reconciliation, justice and peace.

... about equal sharing, discovering common ground and overcoming boundaries...

by eating the bread of life and quenching our thirst for righteousness.

May the mysterious food Jesus had on that day,
and the water the woman went away with – even without a jar,
fill our hearts, and still our longing for the fullness of life.
Amen.