

A Story of Openness and Inclusion

As we come to the close of another season of contemplation and introspection before we usher in another celebration of Easter, the Gospel of John is a beautiful presentation of Jesus who came to bring the Kingdom or Realm of God to humankind. We know that John's Gospel is the last of the four Gospels in our Christian scripture that does not share many of the stories that are repeated in the synoptic Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. In the introduction to the Gospel of John in the Oxford Study Bible published in 1992 we are reminded that *"In the Christian tradition John has often been called 'the spiritual' Gospel, because of its attention to the spiritual import of the incidents it reports"*. The introduction refers to this Gospel as *"A Book of Signs"*, noting, *"A 'sign' is an act of power by Jesus, which points to a truth inaccessible to sight and touch, but apprehensible by faith."* In his commentary concerning this story, *"Discourse with the Samaritan Woman at Jacob's Well"*, Fr. Raymond E. Brown makes this statement, *"We may begin with the question of the historical plausibility of the scene."*

The story of the Samaritan woman at the well is a visual picture of this grace and mercy to all people, everywhere, for all time. (John 4:1-42)

First note - Jesus did not baptize anyone, only his disciples did (vs.1-3)

Having heard this Jesus leaves Judea to go back to Galilee and goes through Samaria. According to Raymond E. Brown, a well known and respected scholar concerning the Gospel of John, he points out that verses 1-3 at the beginning of chapter 4 *"were not always part of the Samaria narrative."* Another discussion could be about whether and why Jesus did not baptize but this is not necessary at this time. Father Brown simply points out that this may have been added to counter the remarks in 3:22 and was added to provide a preface to the purpose of Jesus' desire to move from Judea to Galilee. The important circumstance is the "sign" or "story" of Jesus moving through Samaria and his confrontation with a Samaritan woman there.

Father Brown uses this outline for the discourse with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well:

Introduction - 4:1-6

Scene I - 4:7-26

Scene II - 4:27-38

Conclusion - 4:39-42

I would encourage you to read this portion of John's Gospel in any version or translation you understand before you continue. To fully appreciate what John has presented to us it will be important to have the complete story, as outlined above, in your mind and heart.

In the notations for 4:4, Father Brown says this about Jesus' decision to pass through Samaria. *"This is not a geographical necessity; for, although the main route from Judea to Galilee was through Samaria (Josephus Ant. XX.vi.1; 118), if Jesus was in Jordan valley (iii 22) he could easily have gone north through the valley and then up into Galilee through the Bethshan gap, avoiding Samaria."* By this it would seem clear that Jesus intentionally made this choice for his route. So begins this "sign" of the openness and inclusiveness of God's Realm.

Scene I:

Textual Summary:

As Jesus enters Samaria (vs. 1-8) several things occur to set the scene:

He stops in a town called Sychar where Jacob's well was nearby.

It was a convenient stopping point because he was tired.

It was around noon when women did not traditionally come to the well for water.

His disciples went into the town to buy food, so Jesus was alone.

Textual Commentary:

While most manuscripts read "Sychar", Fr. Brown notes that St. Jerome, a noted Bible and theological scholar circa: 360 A.D., identifies this place as "Shechem". Note: [It suggests that this mistake creates a problem with the location of Jacob's well in Samaria. Sychar is associated with modern "Askar" which is about one mile north of Jacob's well, a long walk for getting water, and the fact that Askar has a good well of its own. Jacob's well, however, is only 250 feet from Shechem that was probably a very small settlement at the time. A well about 100 feet deep is first mentioned in this area in Christian pilgrim sources of the 4th century and Fr. Brown notes these descriptions show a good knowledge of the local Palestinian scene.] I point this out to demonstrate how people often get too involved in the literal accuracy of the Bible rather than appreciate the value and intent of the use of stories.

For me this story, as suggested in the title, demonstrates the openness and inclusiveness of God's Realm as announced by Jesus. Jesus could have gone another route to avoid going through Samaria but he did not. His choice brings him into contact with a people that are virtual enemies of Jews. His choice also suggests that he decided to take the shorter route, regardless of the custom of avoidance, to get to where he had chosen to go more efficiently.

Textual Summary:

Jesus asks the woman who came to the well for a drink: (vs. 7-15)

(John's Gospel gives us several important observations along with the story)

As a Jew why to do ask a Samaritan woman for a drink?

(note: Jews and Samaritans did not use the same cups and bowls)

Jesus answers her explaining that, if she knew who he was, she would request "life-giving" water from him.

The woman reminds him that he has no utensils nor equipment to get water from the well because it is deep.

Pointing out that the well was there because of Jacob, a common ancestor of Jews and Samaritans, she asks if he thinks he is greater than Jacob.

Then Jesus replies:

Water from this well is a temporary thirst quencher.

The water I offer comes from within and provides eternal life so you never thirst again.

The woman replies, "give me this water", then I will never need to return here to draw any more water.

Textual Commentary:

This portion shows me the humanity of Jesus and his need for water and rest because he was fatigued. It also tells us that his disciples, knowing his need nourishment, went to the nearby town to get lunch. This humanity of Jesus is often lost in today's reality.

This story then adds the unique inclusion of a woman coming to draw water at a non-traditional time. Her inclusion provides the author the ability to present Jesus in a socially tense situation. We know that men were not accustomed to conversing with women who were strangers, especially women from another culture. The writer even inserts this notation in the text to make his point clear. But Jesus' response reminds us of the divine purpose and mission of Jesus that we must not forget. His expressed purpose was to announce and envision the Realm of God, as it should be among all of us. Being at the well of Jacob he expresses this matter as "life-giving" water. Like most people, the woman responds with a very temporal observation in pointing out that Jesus has no utensils by which to even draw water from the well that was rather deep. She, like many of us, tends to miss the reality of our lives as being more than just temporal beings. She seems to neglect and remember the spiritual lessons that were also associated with the greatness of Jacob and the common ancestors of the Jews and Samaritans.

Jesus then points out that the temporal aspects of living are temporary. His reference to living water points to the deeper and more lasting issues of life that are associated with the eternal and spiritual realm. Her response only wants Jesus to give her this water to negate her need to come every day to draw water. To emphasize this bewilderment between temporal and spiritual matters, the author of John's Gospel adds another twist to draw attention to the Realm of God among us.

Textual Summary:

Jesus turns the tables again. Instead of giving her the water he speaks of he changes the topic. (vs. 16-27)

Now Jesus asks her to call her husband and she replies she has no husband.

Jesus then says he knows that the man she is with now is not her husband and that she has had five husbands.

This truth from Jesus makes her believe that he may actually be a prophet and she changes the subject:

She sites a difference in their worship customs - a mountain in Samaria or the city of Jerusalem.

Jesus replies that in the future neither will be the place of worship.

This time is coming and is already here when people can worship God's Spirit wherever they are.

Since God is Spirit, people can only worship properly filled with the reality of that Spirit.

Then the woman acknowledges their understanding of the coming Messiah who will disclose everything.

Jesus replies, "I am he, I who am talking with you".

At this his disciples return with food and the woman leaves without taking her water gathering equipment.

Textual Commentary:

Why has this woman come to the well of Jacob at this unusual hour, noon time? The normal times were early in the morning or in the cool of the evening to avoid the heat of the sun. Jesus senses that there may be a social issue that brings her to the well apart from the other women so he asks a question to search that out. When he asks her to "Go and call your husband", she quickly responds that she has no husband. Jesus hit the nail on the head, as we might say! The author of John's Gospel provides us with Jesus' response that indicates that she is presently living with a man to whom she is not married and that she has been married several times before. Her response declares that Jesus must be some kind of a prophet, and in her embarrassment, immediately changes the subject to more "spiritual" matters. At times like this it is not unusual for people to change to a religious discussion to avoid discussing the actual problems in life.

Jesus avoids the details of the differences between the Jews and Samaritans and more rather quickly to the main point - God is Spirit and can only be worshiped by in the authenticity of that Spirit. Her response again tries to avoid the depth and quality of such worship by engaging in another more temporal discussion of their differing views of the coming Messiah who will explain all these things. Her understanding is that he has not yet come and was hopeful that Jesus would end this discussion.

When Jesus replies, "I am he, I who am talking with you", can you imagine the shock on her face? Things were getting very personal between them and the woman is now looking for a way out. Thanks to the writer of John, we have the breather she needs. The disciples return with food and the woman takes this opportunity to leave and go back to town. We look for the continuation of this dramatic story because as she leaves she does not take her water gathering equipment with her.

Scene II:

Textual Summary:

With the woman returning to her town and the return of the disciples with their food, the story flows to its conclusion. (vs. 27-38)

The first thing we are told, as this story continues, is that the disciples do not ask Jesus what he wants nor do they question the presence of the woman and why Jesus was talking to her. The story continues with a focus on the woman back in her town saying, "Come see a man who told me all I have ever done" and asking, "could he be the Messiah?" Then the Gospel tells us that many left the town and went to see Jesus.

Now we are told that the disciples were begging Jesus to eat something but they receive surprising answers:

- I have food that you know nothing about.
- The disciples wonder if he had been given food from someone else.
- Jesus explains that his real food is "obeying God and finishing the work he was given to do".
- Jesus explains growing crops and reaping the harvest noting that many may be involved in this process.
- Jesus explains that the crops are ripe and ready for harvest and that he is the one who was sent to reap the harvest gathering crops for eternal life
- He ends this discourse telling the disciples that they will be sent to be harvesters.

Textual Commentary:

To me, the main purpose of this story is to proclaim the ministry of Jesus, as he understands it from God. John's Gospel is all about introducing us to Jesus and his mission so that we can become followers to continue this ministry to extend the Realm of God on earth. It is similar to the theme that Jesus gives to the disciples who were fishermen and how they would learn to catch people to be part of God's Realm with him. Our real food or nourishment in being alive is not just consuming but to serve in harvesting crops to embellish the Domain of God on earth. The dictionary defines the noun - "realm - a domain in which something is dominant". John's Gospel starts with, "in the beginning" and continues with many "stories" and "signs" to introduce Jesus the Christ (the anointed one). These stories and signs moreover demonstrate that the people of God are also called to be working as harvesters in God's Realm.

The woman at the well becomes the key focus to explain and demonstrate how this harvest works.

- Flexibility: Jesus is an itinerate Rabbi who is not necessarily of the "old school". He is flexible to the time and circumstances of the need at hand and led by the Spirit that enables him to be God's presence for the occasion.
- Focused: Jesus has a clear image of his purpose in life and is faithful to that calling.
- Inventive: marked by interdependence and creativity of thought and action as he moves forward in life from day to day.
- Compassion: Jesus has a deep awareness and sympathy for human suffering, so much so, that he is willing to forego tradition (the past) in order to fulfill the needs of today and tomorrow (the future).
- Knowledgeable: Jesus is very apt in perception, learning and reasoning.
- Teacher: People not only learn from what he says but especially by what he does.

There are many other words that can be used to describe Jesus but these are a few that I see in this particular story. In the beginning of the Synoptic Gospels we are told about Jesus being led into the wilderness by the Spirit wherein he was tempted by Satan. This same Spirit seems to coach him in every situation as he moved from day to day into his ministry of living into and extending the Realm of God on earth.

The longer part of this scene deals with his interaction with the disciples to make them aware of the inward and invisible grace of the divine Presence that nourishes him. He speaks of it as real food about which they know little. He uses this occasion to help them comprehend and desire this food for themselves to enable them to do even greater things than he is doing. It is unquestionably John's Gospel that desires our familiarity and acquisition of this life that is in Christ Jesus in all its fullness.

This story not only makes this opportunity clear for his disciples but it is an invitation to everyone in all times and in all places. God is no respecter of persons and, to be followers of that Living Presence, we too must learn to have that same respect and love for all as well. It is equally for our enemies (the Samaritans) and for our friends (the disciples). As we go through the wilderness of life we need this same Spirit to facilitate us in taking an active part in the harvest process by sowing, planting and reaping. This Gospel makes it clear that now is the time, today is the day because the Realm of God is for the here and now and not some "pie in the sky by and by". It can only be so if we eat this food and obtain the passion and focus that brings in this Realm of God, for us and for everyone. Jesus never denies the reality of the world but always goes beyond the material to call forth the mystery and wonder of the essential core of life, the Light of everything that was, is, and will be. As science begins to demonstrate, energy and matter are made equally important by the speed of light and Jesus enables this Light to make it so in our lives.

Conclusion:

Textual Summary:

Now the woman returns with many of the Samaritans from the town with her. (vs. 39-42)

The woman witnessed to her people she believed in Jesus because he told her everything she had ever done. The people responded by coming with her to meet Jesus, and we are told, begged Jesus to stay with them which he did for two days. The conclusion to this episode is that, having heard Jesus' message for themselves, they believed him as well. We are told they made it clear to the woman that their belief was not because of anything she said but rather because what they heard and seen personally for themselves. This is what made them know that Jesus was the Savior of the world.

Textual Commentary:

When the woman returned to her town and told the people about Jesus it did inspire them to go back with her to the well and meet Jesus for themselves. When they heard Jesus they too were intrigued with his message and invited him to stay with them so they could hear more. Jesus did stay, according to the story, for two days. The result was that they now believed in him as well, but the author of John's Gospel makes it clear their belief came from what they personally heard from Jesus and not anything she said. Being present with Jesus to hear his words and witness his manner of life was what convinced them that he was the Savior of the world.

Closing Remarks:

This last part of our story convinces me that, even today, people become believers in Jesus the Christ when they have a personal experience with Jesus for themselves. We can and may extend an introduction, but each person needs to connect with Jesus for him/herself in order to believe.

For this reason I believe this Gospel is primary in forming and cementing a relationship with Christ, the annointed one. This Gospel tells stories that are not found in the Synoptic Gospels and the stories are incidents or scenes about the life of Jesus that are not presented as history. This is very similar to style of Jesus in that he primarily spoke in parables and stories. Jesus did not speak with theological facts or arguments but rather shared God's genuine concern for them and explained how the Realm of God among them would bring the assistance they needed for living. Jesus was a teacher who was open, flexible, compassionate, knowledgeable and inventive to articulate to their situations in explaining God's love and announcing a new world order called the Kingdom, or Realm, of God.

John's Gospel identifies Jesus with three familiar words:

The **Way**: [a journey or passage; a course of conduct; how a result is obtained or an end is achieved] When people read about Jesus, especially in the Gospel of John, they become acquainted with "The Way" of Jesus. It is a way that begins within a person, enlivening their minds and hearts to become a natural expression in their outward and visible actions as a person's way of life.

The **Truth**: [a true statement; conformity to reality or actuality; the quality of being near to the true value] According to John's Gospel, Jesus shared his truth that "I Am". Jesus demonstrated he was the verb to be in word and deed, showing himself as telling and living the truth. This is what people heard and saw whenever they were in his presence. Jesus did not speak as a third party witness but as one who personally knew and lived whatever he spoke. He was not selling snake oil or pie in the sky by and by, but about the genuine Power and Source of this world who desired that all creation would experience and live in that truth.

The **Life**: In the dictionary the word life has many inferences - [the experience of being alive; the course of existence of an individual; the condition of living or the state of being alive; a characteristic state or mode of living] When people encountered Jesus they soon began to feel they were looking at Life in so many authentic ways. "I am come that you may have life in all its fullness", the author of John's Gospel claims was spoken by Jesus. Is it not true that people desire life in all its fullness? This was part of the authenticity of Jesus. He did not come to "sell" anything but to announce and demonstrate the reality of God's Realm and what life should be like for anyone who becomes a living part of that Realm.

Salvation then is a daily walk with the Eternal Presence that is in you "in spirit and in truth" for "greater is that which is in you than anything in the world". This is what Jesus lived and preached and, when people saw this reality for themselves, their lives were changed, becoming persons of openness and inclusion.