

Text: John 4: 4-26
Title: High Noon at Jacob's Well
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Roger Allen Nelson

Hanna Yousef Hawileh is a Palestinian Christian who lives in East Jerusalem. He goes by "Johnny," works as a tour guide, speaks four languages, and with a twinkle in his eye, claims that you can trace his family back to Genesis 10:29. He is long and lanky, quick with a smile and a smoke, and is eager to talk about politics, religion, and soccer. And just under the surface there boils a clear and certain rage at the oppression and injustice he experiences from the Israeli government.

Everyone stays in their own lane in Israel.

Jews relate to Jews. Palestinians to Palestinians. Muslims to Muslims. Bedouin to Bedouin. The only consistent point of crossover is commerce. Housing, friendship, meals, work, worship, and romance is all done within your own people group. Life is segregated by walls and laws and complicated categories designed to divide and suppress.

So, when I asked Johnny if he could imagine dating a Jew he rolled his eyes in abject astonishment. When I asked about the possibility of religious conversion he looked at me with stunned disbelief and disdain at my ignorance. It was inconceivable to him. You are who you are. Identity is indelibly etched. There is no comingling or converting. The only hope is to live together in peace, but there is no changing creation's order.

Israel is about the size the New Jersey, and in the month that I've been there I've been to most every region. One consistent impression is that as an outsider you're invisible to others. Except when money is changing hands, there's little kindness, little eye contact, little acknowledgement. You can feel like you don't exist. Israeli schoolchildren, protected by armed guards, view you with skepticism and indifference. Muslim women don't look you in the eyes. Jewish men jostle by without a thought. Everyone stays in their own lane....

When Jesus asks for a drink at Jacob's Well he's breaking boundaries that were more than social niceties. Religion, culture, history, ethnicity, and gender combined to create unchangeable lanes and insurmountable walls. And yet in broad daylight Jesus barrels through barriers that were seemingly fixed with creation's foundation.

Let's sit with this story for a few minutes....

Jesus and his disciples are headed from Jerusalem back home to Galilee. The main road crossed into Samaria, but most Jews would take a detour to avoid soiling themselves by setting foot in Samaria.

Samaria had been a part of Israel, but when it was overrun by the Assyrians they comingled, tolerated immigrants, compromised on religious rites and rules, and even suggested that the holy mountain was not Mount Zion but a mountain in Samaria.

And therefore, seven hundred years later, Samaritans were seen as mutts and mongrels. Israelites didn't want to talk, touch, visit, eat, or drink with them. They wouldn't rub shoulders or engage on any sort of equal footing. Even commerce was questionable. It was hard to imagine a good Samaritan.

And yet, while there were other ways home, chances are that Jesus said, "Let's cut through Samaria."

In the heat of the day, Jesus and his disciples arrive at a well in the heart of what we know today as the West Bank. With the sun high and the air dry, you don't skip the chance for a drink. So, Jesus sends his disciples into a village to get food while he waits by the well....

A Samaritan woman approaches ~ the last person you'd expect Jesus to talk to. As one scholar puts it:

Women had no place in public life. They were not to be seen or heard, especially by not by holy men, who did not speak to their own wives in public. One group of pious men was known as the "the bruised and bleeding Pharisees" because they closed their eyes when they saw a woman coming down the street, even if it meant walking into a wall and breaking their noses.

But. But, Jesus asks her for a drink. He doesn't have a bucket. He needs help. He puts himself in her debt. He asks to drink from a defiled Samaritan cup. He asks a defiled Samaritan woman....

Popular preacher John Piper describes her as "a worldly, sensually-minded, unspiritual harlot from Samaria." And later in the same sermon he calls her a "whore."

John Calvin lays the blame for her divorces at her feet. In his words:

.... being a forward and disobedient wife, she constrained her husbands to divorce her. I interpret the words thus: "Though God joined thee to lawful husbands, thou didst not cease to sin, until, rendered infamous by numerous divorces, thou prostituted thyself to fornication."

Yikes!

Allow me a little aside...

There is nothing in the text to suggest that the woman at the well was loose, shady, or any more culpable or corrupt than you or me. All we know is that her story was tragic. All we know is that she'd been married five times.

One of my mother's best friends was widowed early when her pastor husband was killed in a boating accident. She's married three times since. She's buried three husbands. She's good and generous of spirit. She's loved and she's lost. She knows the beauty and brokenness of this good world. She's on husband number four, but some kind of harlot? Come on....

Is there any good reason to see the Samaritan women any differently?
Is there any good reason other than the long and latent history of chauvinism (or misogyny) in the Christian tradition?

We don't know her heart, or her story. This is the longest conversation with Jesus recorded in scripture, but at no point does Jesus call for repentance or speak of sin. All the text actually says is, "You have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband." There are any number of ways to imagine her story as complicated or tragic, but not necessarily scandalous. Makes you wonder what's going on with the popular interpretation....

But, back to the matter at hand.

What seems crucial is that Jesus reveals to a woman from Samaria that God ~ the God of all people, the God of Jews and Samaritans ~ will not be worshipped on a special mountain, or even in the right temple,
but in Spirit and truth,
in the devotion of heart and mind,
regardless of tribe, culture, class, ethnic lane, religion, or gender.

And when she says that she knows that the "Anointed One" is coming.
He says, "I am he."

Dear friends, this is the first full-throated confession or self-identification that Jesus makes in John's gospel. To one in the farthest outside lane, this is the first place where Jesus says, "I Am."

As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it:

It is the first time he has said that to another living soul. It is a moment of full disclosure, in which the triple outsider and the Messiah of God stand face to face with no pretense about who they are. Both stand fully lit at high noon for one bright moment in time, while all the rules, taboos and history that separate them fall forgotten to the ground.

Thanks be to God.

Remarkably her response is to run back and tell the people in her village, "Could this be the Messiah?" In turn, Jesus and his disciples stay for a few days of eating and drinking in Samaria, and many come to "believe in him because of the woman's testimony." The one woman who had five husbands is the first Christian preacher. Again, thanks be to God.

Now, to place this story in the unfolding of John's gospel...

There is here a wonderful tension or contrast between Nicodemus under the cover of the night and the Samaritan women under the bright midday sun.

Nicodemus is a religious insider; she's an unnamed outsider.

Nicodemus is the right gender with the right credentials; all she has is her story.

Nicodemus calls Jesus "teacher;" she names him "Messiah."

And maybe the most fascinating: Nicodemus seeks after Jesus, but Jesus goes to great lengths, pushes through taboos, and asks a Samaritan woman for help, that he might reach her. And she doesn't back down.

It is an important contrast; the implication being that from floor to rafter, from stem to stern, all are welcome. All are called to the source of living water.

Whether you're seeking answers in the dark, or stunned by Jesus at high noon,
whether you're a learned scholar, or a "whore,"
whether you're religiously confident, or just know that you're lost,
whether you're Palestinian, Bedouin, Samaritan, or south suburban,
whether you're gay, straight, or crooked,
whether you're divorced, single, married, widowed, or lonely,
whether you know you're thirsty, or think you're satiated,
you are loved and accepted by God in Christ.

God in Christ would cross boundaries, break rules, and change lanes to offer living water ~ you are loved and accepted by God in Christ.

How then might we respond?

Let us worship God in Christ, in Spirit and in truth.

Let us not build walls but be those who break barriers and barrel through boundaries that all might know that they're loved and accepted by God in Christ.

Let us come to the table where grace overflows and mercy is served in abundance.

For even here is a taste of living water ~ you are loved and accepted by God in Christ.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.