

Jesus & the Shady Lady

John 4:4-8, 28-30, 39-41 ⁴ Jesus had to go through Samaria. ⁵ He came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, which was near the land Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there. Jesus was tired from his journey, so he sat down at the well. It was about noon. ⁷ A Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me some water to drink." ⁸ His disciples had gone into the city to buy him some food.

²⁸ The woman put down her water jar and went into the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ "Come and see a man who has told me everything I've done! Could this man be the Christ?" ³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to see Jesus.

³⁹ Many Samaritans in that city believed in Jesus because of the woman's word when she testified, "He told me everything I've ever done." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ Many more believed because of his word,

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In the adult class on Sunday morning, we were talking just last week about how the gospels are more focused on faith issues than they are on presenting historical events in chronological order. Chapters three and four of John's Gospel are a good illustration of this. John tells the story of Nicodemus' meeting with Jesus in chapter three and then, with great effect, tells of a very different meeting with Jesus in chapter four.

Nicodemus was an important and respected man. He was a devout man who was devoted to his faith and lived a life centered on obedience to the law of Moses. One night he sought out Jesus in order to learn more about him. It didn't go very well. Nicodemus was confused by some of the things that Jesus said, such as, "You must be born again." Nicodemus couldn't seem to think outside the borders of his traditional understanding of the faith of Israel. He left that meeting asking, "How can these things that I've heard be true?"

That account concludes with the famous teaching that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who trusts in him won't perish but will have eternal life."

I've remarked before that this famous verse says, "God so loved the *world*. . ." and that the Greek word translated "world" is the word *kosmos*, which means just what it sounds like, the cosmos, the sum total of everything here and now, **all** of creation. And rather quickly, the writer moves on to chapter four to give us an example of how God's love for the world includes **all** people.

As Jesus was headed north from Judea toward Galilee, he travelled through the region of Samaria. To say that there was bad blood between the Jews and the Samaritans is an understatement. The Samaritans worshipped God, alright, but they worshipped on Mount Gerizim instead of the temple in Jerusalem. A Jewish army destroyed the shrine on Mount Gerizim in 128 BC. The Samaritans had their own, slightly different version of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and they didn't recognize any of the writings of the prophets or other scrolls of the Jews as valid scripture. There was hate and disgust on both sides.

Despite all of the hatred and disgust, Jesus and his disciples are traveling up through Samaria to get back to their home territory in Galilee. It was a hot day and Jesus was hungry and thirsty and he stopped about noontime to rest near a well. The disciples went on into the nearby town to get food. While he sat there, a woman came to draw water - and Jesus asked her for a

drink. She is frankly surprised that he'd even speak to her. She recognizes him as a Jew, perhaps by his accent or clothes. Then he strikes up a conversation with her.

In the time of Jesus, there was a debate about whether or not women even had a soul. This unnamed woman, living in a man's world, is a Samaritan. She lives in the wrong country, with the wrong religion. On top of that, respectable people didn't have conversations with the opposite gender except at home with family members. She's a *nobody* but Jesus engages her in conversation nonetheless.

The conversation with Nicodemus was at night and it was rather reserved. This one is lively and in broad daylight. Nicodemus can't see beyond his religious system, but the Samaritan woman engages Jesus in theological debate. Nicodemus is a respected member of society. He's educated, prosperous, and pious. The Samaritan woman is none of those things; just the opposite, you might say. And here is our first major lesson in this passage. God so loved the world – including all people, rich and poor, prominent and of no account, Jew and Jew hater, respected and beneath notice - that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who trusts in him won't perish but will have eternal life.

We've explored how very different Nicodemus and this unnamed woman are, but there's one thing they have in common and that brings us to the second lesson to be found in these stories. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again. Nicodemus is incredulous! That's impossible! You can't crawl back into your mother's womb and be born a second time! Jesus offers the woman "living water" and she says, "I don't see how. You don't even have a bucket and rope!" When Jesus tells her that if she drinks the living water, she'll never again be thirsty, she replies, "I'd like that! I'm tired of hauling water from this well!" Both Nicodemus and this Samaritan insist on taking Jesus literally. From our vantage point today, we think that they're a little bit thickheaded. Why can't they understand that Jesus is speaking figuratively, that he's using an expression? And yet, we think that we are being wise and faithful when we insist on reading scripture literally, ignoring that there might be deeper wisdom in seeing metaphors and poetic expression in the text. Our second lesson is that we shouldn't follow the examples of Nicodemus and the Samaritan and be stuck in hearing scripture literally all the time.

I titled this sermon "Jesus and the Shady Lady." If you've been wondering when we'd get to that part, the wait is over. A lot of sermons have focused on the questionable morals of this Samaritan woman. In the course of their conversation, Jesus tells her to go get her husband and come back to the well. She replies that she doesn't have a husband. Then Jesus says, "You are right to say, 'I don't have a husband'. 'You've had five husbands, and the man you are with now isn't your husband. You've spoken the truth.'" At this point in the sermon, there's usually a lot of "tut-tuting" and "tsk-tsking," while the preacher screws up his face in a sour expression to even mention such abominable behavior.

Some years ago, back before my time, the Ames Brothers sang a song titled, "The Naughty Lady of Shady Lane." In those more tactful days, songs weren't so explicit as they are today. The lyrics included: *The naughty lady of Shady Lane has hit the town like a bomb. The back fence gossip ain't been this good since Mabel ran off with Tom. You should see how she carries on with her admirants galore. She must be giving them quite a thrill, the way they flock to her door. She throws those 'come hither' glances at every Tom, Dick and Joe. When offered some liquid refreshment, the lady never, never says, 'No.'* *The naughty lady of Shady Lane, so delightful to hold – And she's only nine days old!* The song was a big hit! People were drawn in by the risqué innuendo, only to be caught off guard by the innocent ending.

The Samaritan woman has been pictured as a tawdry tramp, going through husbands like a celebrity Hollywood starlet. Five husbands and now she's living with a man out of wedlock. What power Jesus has, to convert this immoral woman into a faithful follower! But that interpretation of the text comes from reading things into it, much like listening to that old Ames Brothers song. The reasons for her marital history may intrigue some interpreters, but they don't seem to be a matter of concern to Jesus. The woman is frank and honest and doesn't appear to be shamed by the conversation. There's no mention of sin in the text. Jesus neither judges her nor forgives her. In fact, he praises her for speaking the truth.

While it might be spicy to picture this woman as a willy hussy, in those days when life was often short and brutish, she may have outlived those five husbands. In those days when divorce was at the whim of men, she may have suffered from cruel divorce through no fault of her own. Rather than being a shady lady, a tawdry temptress, a woman of easy virtue, it's more likely that she was an older woman to whom life had been unkind, forced in her declining years to live with the kind support of a brother. Despite a hard life, she retained a lively interest in her faith, the intellectual nimbleness to spar with a stranger, and the curiosity to consider new possibilities. Rather than deplore this woman, I think we would do well to praise and respect this woman who became the first evangelist for Christ, bringing out her village to hear and learn from Jesus. That's the third lesson in this story. Keep your heart and mind open like she did, so that you can grow in understanding God's will. And then, like her, share your joy and peace with others. Praise God, who loved us all so much that he sent his Son to show us eternal life. Amen!

Sisters and Brothers,
Do not blame your temptations on others.
Look to Jesus for inspiration and strength to resist evil.
Yield not to temptation