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UNEDITED

*“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again;
but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never again be thirsty.
The water that I shall give will be a spring of water within,
welling up and bringing eternal life.” --John 4: 13-14*

Story for all Ages: The Woman at the Well

Reading: John 4: 1-42

Our Window into Wellsprings

This is the first Sunday of the advent season, when Christians celebrate the coming birth of Jesus. We may or may not identify ourselves as Christians to enjoy the music, lights, beauty and human kinship of this season. Many Unitarian Universalists identify themselves as ethical Christians, if not spiritual Christians. Today, I want to offer reflections on how our Christian heritage offers the gift of a wellspring of spiritual strength, as well as guidance for right relationship and action. These reflections are a gift from our foremothers.

The women of this church, organized as the Ladies Christian Union gave this window on the north side of the sanctuary in memory of the first 10 years of the formation of the First Unitarian Society, as our church was named then. As we've already heard this morning, the window depicts the story of the Samaritan Woman at the Well from Chapter 4 of the Gospel of John. Of all the stories they could have chosen from the Bible, why did they choose this story? As we will explore, they had good reasons for choosing it, but I think they would be even more pleased with their choice had they had the benefits of the feminist biblical scholarship which we have available to us today. Or perhaps our fore-mothers came to their own uplifting conclusions through their independent reading and devotional life in the privacy of their homes and circles of conversation among themselves.

John is one of the four Gospels found in the New Testament, which contain distinct portraits of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.^[1] All four contain a few of the same stories. Matthew, Mark and Luke share more of the same material and are known as the Synoptic Gospels—synoptic meaning “seeing together”.^[2] There has been wonderful historical scholarship about the life of Jesus of Nazareth through analyzing these texts, but this morning we are less concerned about whether the story actually happened the way we have read it together this morning. “All four gospels are attempting to bring the good news of the story of Jesus to the faith needs of the particular community” for which it was written. And similarly this morning, we will look at what the good news is for us from this story. What is the meaning of Jesus’ identity and mission?^[3] After all, we sit each Sunday morning in our sanctuary as the light of this story filters through this colored glass to your left. And this story is proclaimed each night as it is lighted from inside this sanctuary to passers by.

Personally, I've had a conflicted relationship with the Gospel of John. I love it's poetic and mystical language:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.[\[4\]](#)

But at the same time, there is more anti-Semitic language in this book than in the other Gospels. In the way the language is constructed, you could almost forget that Jesus was a Jew himself. Indeed, the Gospel of John has been used by Christians to justify horrific crimes against Jewish people. Each Easter week, I attend the beautiful Good Friday service conducted by my Christian Clergy friends in the area. I am moved by the lament, passion and hope expressed in the service. But then comes the reading from John,

(Pilate) said to the Jews, 'Here is your King!' They cried out, 'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!' Pilate asked (the Jews), 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but the emperor.' Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.[\[5\]](#)

From our monthly meetings together, I know that each of the ministers participating in the service is committed to freedom of religion and interfaith dialogue. But during this ecumenical service these passages are not read along with an exploration of their historical context. Since John's words about Jews have been misused in order to support Christian anti-Semitism, I would feel more comfortable if they were always preceded with an explanation of historical context.

The Gospel was written later than the other Gospels- about 80 or 90 years after Jesus' birth. This was about the time that there was "a break between the Jewish synagogue and those Jews who claimed Jesus as the messiah."[\[6\]](#) Professor Gail R. O'Day, who wrote the chapter about John in the *Women's Bible Commentary* cautions us to imagine what that break meant to the community it was written for. She says,

It was metaphorically, and often quite literally, a rupture in a family. These new Christians were faced with an impossible choice: they could claim Jesus as the Messiah and be forced to leave the synagogue and the community that had nurtured them and given them life; or remain in the synagogue and deny what they believed to be the fullness of God's gift to the world. The intense language that John uses about 'the Jews' is fraught with the pain of this choice. John does not speak of the Jewish

people... but he uses (the words) 'the Jews' as a symbol for powers and authorities who oppose (the messianic view of Jesus. This is) insider language- one member of a family speaking in pain to another... Contemporary interpreters can best capture the original intent of John's language by applying its critique to those powers and authorities within the Christian community itself who oppose and do not recognize the witness of Jesus. [7]

So now let's get to the particular chapter of John we are concerned with this morning. To prepare for this morning, I read this story many times in several different translation versions and sat in front of our beautiful window. I had a vague understanding that this story was another example of how Jesus welcomed everyone into his ministry, even a woman of an enemy people. Then I read a great number of interpretations of the story that explained that the reason the woman came to the well at noon, the hottest part of the day was because she was a woman of shame, probably due to her sexual improprieties. After all, she had married and divorced five husbands and was living now with a man who was not her husband! Sounds pretty scandalous, especially during that time and place. She needed to avoid the usual times when women gathered at the well to avoid the gossip. And when Jesus "outed her"... naming all those improprieties, she changed the subject because she didn't want to further expose her shameful deeds. When she begins to see him as a prophet, she goes back to town to tell people about the remarkable man she met. And they were so interested in what she had to say that they went out to meet him, too.

As I worked with the scripture and commentary, something troubled me about the interpretations I was reading. I'm more than a little tired of the negative and simplistic view of women as like Eve – temptresses, root of original sin, and causers of evil in the world. And gee whiz, wasn't Jesus a great guy to talk with a lowly woman, who looked up to him from where she sat on the ground at his feet.

It was the last part of the story that tipped me off to the possibility of another interpretation:

Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' They left the city and were on their way to him. [8]

If this Samaritan woman was so reviled for her shameful ways, why did anyone listen to her when she brought the good news back to the city? Had the traditional interpretation sold both the woman and Jesus short?

Just this week I discovered Professor O'Day's interpretation in the *Women's Bible Commentary*. She explains that the source of the bitter conflict between the Jews and Samaritans was a dispute about the correct location of the cultic place of worship. You remember from our reading this morning, that this is the problem that the woman puts before Jesus. The Samaritans built and worshipped at a shrine on Mount Gerizim- which competed

with the temple in Jerusalem. Jewish troops destroyed this shrine about 128 years before Jesus was born.[\[9\]](#)

The Samaritan woman at the well provides a striking contrast to everyone with whom Jesus has spoken prior to this. She is not named, but is known only by what she is – “a foreign woman.” So Jesus’ conversation with her is indeed scandalous- a scandal noted by the woman herself in the dialogue we heard this morning. The woman knows that a Jewish man should not talk with a Samaritan woman. And a Jew should not consider drinking water from a Samaritan container. The scandal is also noted by Jesus’ disciples when they arrive back at the well. Jewish rabbis did not speak in public with women[\[10\]](#) --any woman, no matter what her particular life had been like.

The disciples want to rebuke the woman and also to ask Jesus why he is speaking to her, but their questions go unvoiced. Jesus will not be limited by such social exclusions.

Jesus crosses boundaries: the boundary between male and female and the boundary between the chosen people and rejected people. Jesus’ journey into enemy territory and his conversation with the woman show that the love of God is available to all. His ministry challenges the status quo by offering the water of life to a Samaritan woman.[\[11\]](#)

The traditional interpretations of this story de-legitimize the woman as a conversation partner for Jesus and as a recipient of his good news: First, by raising questions about the woman’s moral character; and second, many commentators express doubts about the woman’s ability to engage with Jesus in serious conversation.[\[12\]](#)

The popular portrait of the woman as of dubious morals and guilty of improper sexual behavior constitutes a misreading of John. The Samaritan woman tells Jesus she has no husband and Jesus responds by telling her the story of her life. The text does not say what most interpreters have automatically assumed... that the woman has had five husbands and has been divorced five times. But there are many possible reasons for the woman’s marital history. Perhaps the woman was trapped in the custom of a levirate marriage. In the culture of her time, if she was widowed and childless, she would have had to marry her husband’s brother. She may have been widowed five times and still required to live with her husband’s family. The last male in the family line may have refused to marry her.[\[13\]](#)

You might say that the conversation between Jesus and the woman serve to illustrate Jesus’ ability to see and know all things.[\[14\]](#) You might remember the trend a few years ago for people to wear bracelets saying “WWJD” – What would Jesus do? People wore them as a reminder to do what Jesus would do in a similar situation. I like that way of thinking, so I interpret this story as showing that Jesus was fully present to this woman. He empathized with her lot in life, so that she felt really seen and understood. And that way of being with her in a sense made her feel whole... You might say that kind of presence “saved her.” And as she feels seen and understood by Jesus, she sees him in a new way, too. “Sir, I see you are a prophet.”

Recognizing Jesus in this way leads the woman to ask the most pressing theological question standing between the Jews and the Samaritans. Where is the proper place to worship

God? In traditional interpretations of the text, commentators have presupposed that this question was the woman's ploy to change the subject away from a discussion of her moral depravity. Traditional commentators have doubted the woman's intellect. In a faithful reading of the text, we see the woman as a character, who is not afraid to stay in conversation with Jesus. She realizes that a prophet is a perfect person to ask about something she has been wondering about. --Just as any of us might be thrilled to ask questions of an expert in an area of interest to us. In fact the Samaritan woman is the first person in the Gospel of John to engage in serious theological conversation with Jesus. At the end of this conversation about worship, her faith grows again and she begins to think about the possibility of Jesus as the Messiah.[\[15\]](#)

When Jesus' disciples return to the well, the woman leaves Jesus to return to the city to testify to her people. On the basis of her testimony, many of the Samaritan villagers believe and go to meet Jesus themselves. In the Gospel of John, the primary mark of discipleship is to see Jesus and to tell others about that experience. When others meet Jesus themselves, their own experience replaces the words of the disciple who told them about him. The woman is not only the first to engage in serious conversation, she is his first disciple in a land of people outside the Jewish community.

Professor O'Day points out that the Gospel of John's "intricate blend of narrative and discourse, the use of figurative language, and the extensive dialogues between Jesus and other characters all combine to open the story to the reader's own experience."

As I put myself in the place of the Samaritan woman, I imagine Jesus' absolute presence with me in a way that makes me feel that he really knows me. He understands the complexities of my life circumstances and motivations. He loves me despite the fact that he knows I have dark moments. I feel his spirit connecting with my spirit and I have a sense of hope because I am not alone. He tells me where I choose to worship doesn't matter and he gives me great latitude in how I worship. Praying and meditating in a spirit of love and truth is what matters. There is a source of love available to me as refreshing as living water from a well that is not located in one particular place on earth, but springs eternal through God's unfailing presence- Love's unfailing presence, if I am open to drawing from that well and drinking from it. Its' Grace is offered to me, no matter who I am.

And so our window brings the light of that teaching into our sanctuary...God's grace... Love's grace—is offered to each and every one of you, no matter who you are. This is indeed Good News for the season. Good news for any season. In faith, so may it be. In faith, so it is. Amen.

[\[1\]](#) Ibid. page 381.

[2] *Engaging the New Testament: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*. Russell Pregeant. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997. page 573.

[3] *Women's*.

[4] John 1:1-5 NRSV.

[5] John 19:14-16 NRSV.

[6] *Women's*, page 382.

[7] *Women's*, page 382.

[8] John 4:28-30.

[9] *Women's*, page 383. (quotes and paraphrase)

[10] *Women's*, page 383-384. (quotes and paraphrase)

[11] *Women's*, page 384. (quotes and paraphrase)

[12] *Women's*, page 384. (quotes and paraphrase)

[13] *Women's*, page 384. (quotes and paraphrase)

[14] Idea from *Women's*, page 384.

[15] *Women's*, page 384. (some ideas, quotes and paraphrase)