

Lent 3 (John 4:5-42)

Vv. 5-9: When has a physical need forced you to reach beyond your comfort zone?

Vv. 10-5: Would a spiritual need force you to reach beyond your comfort zone? Remember Nicodemus came to Jesus by night.

Vv. 16-26: At moments in your life when you believe you have reached the freedom of Spirit and Truth, what gradual steps brought you there?

Vv. 27-30: How has your ability to tell the truth about yourself helped other people take steps beyond their comfort zone?

Vv. 31-8: How do you recognize and engage the work of the Spirit that others are already also doing?

Vv. 39-42:

In this story, something happens both to the Samaritan woman and to Jesus that satisfies them. The Samaritan woman, when she runs back to the town and speaks to the people there, does not tell them of living water or of worshiping God in spirit and truth; instead she tells them that she has met someone who knew her story, who recognized her and told her the truth about herself. Jesus, who sits down at the well tired and thirsty, is at peace and content when the disciples return, and he sets aside their offer of food.

When have you known that sense of release from anxiety and need? How did it happen? Have you ever assisted in releasing others? What did it take?

The Gospel of John shows us Jesus' most positive relationships with women. The first and most engaging of these is the Samaritan woman. Some of what she and Jesus say to each other almost sounds like teasing, even flirting. If you read it with a smile, the entire exchange makes more sense. Could it be that they enjoyed each other's company?

This conversation comes soon after Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. In his Gospel John has other parallel events, in which the first is an incomplete version of an event, but the second is a fulfilled version of the same kind of event. When Jesus and Nicodemus talk, that conversation seems to dissolve; we are left unclear what the impact was, or even how it ends. When Jesus and the Samaritan woman talk, she immediately understands what she must do (however much she seems to weave and duck during her talk with Jesus), and she courageously acts on what most stirred her in the conversation. She is, as Bartimaeus is in the Gospel of Mark, the "perfect" disciple; just as Bartimaeus leaves his cloak behind "to follow Jesus on the way," so the woman leaves her water jar behind to proclaim the good news.

It is often pointed out that John gives us many hints that the woman is in an uneasy relationship with her village. She comes to draw water alone, and she comes to draw water at noon (the heat of the day and the middle of the day). Her past is unstable, perhaps stormy and scandalous—five husbands! If these five were all men from this same village (let alone the one she is living with now who is not her husband), then she could hardly have remained friends with everyone there nor kept intact the web of family connections by marriage. Notice, she is eager to have this "living water" Jesus mentions, since that would mean she no longer needs to leave her house to walk to the well, which she would inevitably do under public scrutiny. (Once again, John plays with ambiguous language: in Greek, "living" and "running" water use the same word.)

What I am most intrigued by is this: when she rushes back to the town, calling people to "come and see" (remember Jesus' first invitation to his disciples!) if this man could be the Messiah, she does not comment on living water or worshipping God in spirit and truth. What has turned her around is the fact that she has met "a man who told me everything I have ever done." All Jesus did was laugh that she is (finally) telling the truth when she says she has no husband, because she's had five and she's not married to the one she has now. Notice, she changes the subject when he brings that up—but what sticks with her is the fact that he has known the truth about her all along and apparently not condemned her as others do. This has given her the courage not only to face the town, but somehow to "own" her story: "he has told me everything I have ever done" is also an indirect way of admitting "I've really done some things." Somehow her readiness to be known as the woman with a tumultuous history changes her, just as it transforms her relationship with the town, and even transforms the townsfolk.