

This is the second of our four-week series of Gospel lessons from John. In these four lessons, a series of people have life changing encounters with Jesus. And it's helpful for us to look at the way they react to Jesus. The ways they interact with him often mirror the ways we try interact with him.

Last week, we read in Jn 3 about Nicodemus visiting Jesus. Nicodemus was a wealthy and powerful man, a member of the Jewish Council. This week, we encounter a very different person in Jn ch4.

Jesus is on the road from Judea back north to Galilee. He takes a shortcut through Samaria, an area Jews often avoided. That's because good Jews were supposed to look down their noses at Samaritans. Samaritans had tainted bloodlines. Their ancestors were Jews who intermarried with pagans centuries before. Samaritans had also made religious changes and innovations. Good Jews believed that Samaritans had compromised the true faith. So Samaritans were ethnically and religiously suspect as far as the average 1st century Jew was concerned.

In our stained-glass window, 2nd from the back, we see a depiction of Jesus' parable from Luke. We title that parable the "Good Samaritan." That would be an oxymoron to a 1st century Jew. There were no Good Samaritans from a Jewish standpoint. Most Jews avoided travelling through Samaria, adding many hours to their trips in order to make a detour around it.

Yet Jesus is cutting across Samaria. And at mid-day, at noon, he sits down by the well in Sychar, a well which had been dug by Jacob almost 2,000 years earlier. His disciples go into the village to buy food, leaving Jesus all alone at the well.

A Samaritan woman comes to the well. The fact that she's coming at noon says something important. Nobody draws water at noon. And nobody draws water alone. The women of the town would draw water early in the morning and late in the day when the sun was low in the sky. And it was an important social time for the women of the village.

Nobody draws water alone. And nobody draws water at noon... except her.

We find out later that this woman has a questionable history. She has had 5 husbands, and the 6th guy she's shackled up with now won't give her a ring. So it's probable that this woman comes alone to the well at noon in order to avoid the other women. Other women who look down on her, who talk about her, behind her back and to her face.

The contrast between this woman in ch4 and Nicodemus in ch3 couldn't be sharper. A rich Jewish male, an important teacher, a pillar of his community, versus a poor Samaritan female, a woman with a bad reputation, an outcast in her community.

But while she's at the well, Jesus asks HER for a drink.

She replies with astonishment, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

In that culture, men did not interact publicly with women who were not their wives. On top of that, Jews didn't have anything to do with Samaritans. Good Jews wouldn't even eat off the same plate or drink from the same cup a Samaritan had used.

On top of that, in the Old Testament, every time a man interacted with a woman at a well it was part of the courting process--marriage soon followed.

So she objects. And she has all kinds of good reasons to object. And this is spiritual challenge #1 for us. Jesus asks something of us. And we think of all kinds of reasons to object.

The reasons can be fairly innocent: "That's not the way things are done." They can be concerned with the rest of society: "What will the neighbors think?" They can be because of burdens we carry around with us: "I'm not worthy." Or, there's the wonderful Episcopal Church standby: "We've never done it that way before."

God asks. And we can come up with dozens of excuses to object and say no. But by making excuses, we risk missing out on God's plans and purposes for us. We risk missing out on the good things God brings. Being open to what God asks of us is Challenge #1.

At the well at noon, the woman objects. But Jesus turns the conversation in a different direction. He says basically, 'If you knew who I was, then you'd be asking me for a drink, and not just well-water, but living water.' Well-water in Jesus' time ran the risk of being stale and stagnant. Living water was fresh, clear running water. The nearest analogy for us is the difference between water in an algae covered pond, and water bubbling out of a Rocky Mountain spring.

As so often happens in John, the woman takes Jesus literally. She says that Jesus doesn't have a bucket. How is he possibly going to get the water? And how will he get running, living water out of a well? She asks, "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob who dug this well?" Jacob was great, and the best he could do was this well. How are you going to do better?

And that's challenge #2. We're often trapped by knowing the way things are. And knowing the way things are can often prevent us from seeing the way things could be. How can you improve on the status quo? This is as good as it gets.

Thus we settle for warm, stagnant, mineral-laden well-water. We miss out on God's offer of fresh, cool, vibrant, clear, living water.

So Jesus says, "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

In other words, 'I'm not just giving regular water that will quench your thirst temporarily. I'm giving something eternal and life giving that will bubble up inside of you. What I'm offering will replace the stagnant water within you with fresh, life-giving living water.' If only you're open to accepting it.

And the woman replies, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Again, the Samaritan woman has missed the point. She sees what Jesus is offering as a means to allow her to keep from ever having to come to the well again. But Jesus offers something greater.

She sees it as a way of avoiding the neighbors. But Jesus wants change deep inside of her. He wants her to accept the new life he brings.

So Jesus changes his tactics. She's not dealing with issues on the inside, so he says, "Go, call your husband, and come back."

She admits, she doesn't have a husband. Jesus says, "You're right--you've had 5 husbands, and the man you're living with now is not your husband."

But the interesting thing is what she does next. Jesus has been trying to get her to focus on her. And once he shines the spotlight on her and names her behavior very clearly, she can't handle it. He is pushing her most sensitive button. He is pulling her most painful trigger without a trigger warning.

So the next thing she does is change the subject. She tries to take the conversation in a completely different direction. "I can see that you are a prophet." She says. So she takes the conversation down a different religious path.

She wants to talk about Samaritan versus Jewish issues. Where is the best place to pray to God? The Samaritan Mt. Gerazim? Or Mt. Zion in Jerusalem?

She's switching to an old and tired religious debate. Maybe Jesus will bite. Maybe she can get the prophet to change the subject. That way she can avoid taking a hard look at what's going on with her.

This is challenge #3 for us. We often do everything we can to avoid the important questions. Do I want to think about my own sin? No way. I'd rather change the subject. Do I want the bright light of Jesus pointing out my deficiencies? No. I'd rather think about something else.

None of us wants to have our own sins and deficiencies pointed out. So we say, "Let's change the subject."

Back when I lived in Wichita, Kansas, we were all shocked when the BTK serial killer was captured in our midst. Not only did he appear on the outside to be a normal man, a scout leader, a lay leader in his church, but several of our parishioners knew him. One of them was my senior warden, a retired highway patrol-man who was very upset that his "cop-radar" didn't give him any indication of who Dennis Rader really was. It was hard for us to imagine how someone could keep something that dark and sinister hidden away inside.

That's an extreme case. But I suspect that everyone in this room has something in their present or in their past that they wouldn't want projected up on that wall for everyone to see. We may not be serial murderers. But we've all done or said things we're not proud of.

And what Jesus wants to do is shine his light on our sin, and our pain, and our failures, and our mistakes. And he wants to wash them all away with his cleansing, living water.

That's what Jesus offers the Samaritan woman. He doesn't scold the woman for trying to change the subject. But he sticks to his guns. He lets her know that he is the one sent from God to offer change. He lays it right out there. And it will be an explicit claim, the first of a series of explicit claims in John's Gospel. Jesus will make many claims in John's Gospel. I am the Good Shepherd. I am the Bread of Life. I am the Resurrection. But this is the first.

And it comes not to a Jewish teacher in Jerusalem. It comes not to his inner circle of disciples. It comes not during his teachings to the crowd. It comes to a marginal, despised, Samaritan woman. He tells her, "I am."

I am the Messiah. I am God's agent of change in the world. Don't procrastinate. I'm here. Start to live in a different way. Look inside. Make the changes that really matter. Let me change you. Let me cleanse you. Let me quench your deepest thirst.

And what's amazing is what happens next. Last week with Nicodemus in ch3, we did not see immediate changes, though we did see him acting differently a year or two later. But with the Samaritan woman, we see instant changes.

John's next statement says it all: "Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city."

First, she left that water jar behind. She didn't need stagnant temporary well-water. She had gotten a taste of Jesus' living water.

Second she went back into the city. She wasn't hiding from the neighbors. In fact, she speaks to them:

"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!"

She goes from outcast to evangelist, all because of her encounter with Jesus. Jesus has changed the way she lives.

When it comes to our relationship with Jesus, we have the same challenges as the Samaritan woman.

1. Trying to listen to Jesus without finding excuses to ignore him.
2. Being open to the way things could be, instead of being stuck by the way things are.

3. Taking a good hard look inside at our own sins, our pain, our failings, and letting Jesus offer us change.

These past two weeks, we've seen both the Samaritan woman and Nicodemus change after their encounters with Jesus. May we let Jesus change our lives as well.

Lord Jesus, help us to take a good look inside. Shine the spotlight on the things that really matter. Give us your living water. And help us listen to the things you have to say.