

The Seventh Bridegroom

John 3:26-36; 4:1-19

So this month, we are in a section of John's gospel where the Apostle invites us, his readers, to examine testimony from mere men, fallen people, about themselves and about Jesus. And John also records what Jesus says to the mere men who cross his path. So far we've heard from two men, the first, Nicodemus, was an Israelite nobleman, a rabbi from the upper classes who had some notion that Jesus was something special. But Jesus showed little patience for what Nicodemus guessed was going on. Instead, Christ invited the old rabbi to start life over, to be "*born from above*" and to let God's Spirit breathe life into the old man's thoughts about heavenly things.

Next up was John the Baptist, who was also fallen, a mere man, he tells us in our Call to Worship. But the Baptist was much clearer than Nicodemus about how small men are and how wrong men can be compared to Jesus. So our gospel tells us the story of Jesus and John the Baptist, both on the banks of the Jordan, both of them baptizing, but the crowds began to leave the Baptist and to head up river to Jesus, and John's response was not to feel the insecurity and jealousy so common to mere men, fallen rivals. Instead, the Baptist said, it was his job as a mere man, a fallen human prophet, to point us toward a Savior who would be better and brighter than any mere man.

So the Baptist gave one last prophecy, he said, "*A man cannot receive a thing unless it is given to him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but am sent before him. The Bride belongs to the Bridegroom! The friend of the Bridegroom stands and listens for him and rejoices greatly at the sound of the Bridegroom. So this joy which is mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.'*" So the Baptist knew and prophesied that Jesus was the Savior and that the best a mere man could hope for was to point God's people toward the Bridegroom, the Savior God sent to love and save and get the Bride, God's people to heaven.

So what happened as it turned out was that Jesus' ministry on the banks of the Jordan grew to the point where, our gospel tells us, Christ became a target of "*the Pharisees*" and so Jesus had to abruptly pull up stakes and flee the Jordan River basin. Evidently, the danger was enough that Jesus avoided the more direct route home straight north up the river to the Sea of Galilee. Instead, he and his disciples climbed out of the ravine and headed west into the Judean hill country where the Samaritans lived.

It was a steep and arduous journey that found Jesus at high noon one day, exhausted and dehydrated, resting under what shade could be found in one of those stands of trees that often

grew near the village wells in the hot, dry hills of Palestine. The gospel tells us that Jesus was in *“a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.”*

“And Jacob’s well was there...” the text tells us. Now, the Samaritans were the descendants of the survivors of Israel’s northern kingdom who had intermixed with the various pagan peoples from central Asia, when they all went into the blender during the Babylonian Exile some 600 years before Christ. So the Samaritans were partially descended from Israelites and they lived right in the middle of the Promised Land, but when the proper Israelites returned from Babylon, they regarded their neighbors to the north as godless, faithless traitors who had not stayed kosher during the Exile.

And this began a 400 year family feud that was still raging when Jesus arrived in Sychar and sat baking there in the noon day sun next to the village well. And out from the Samaritan town came yet another witness, another specimen of *“man”*, this time nothing like Nicodemus or John the Baptist. It was a Samaritan woman, a person that few Jews would have given the time of day. And Jesus astounded her by asking her for a drink. Because for them to share a drink from the same jar was a gesture that required a degree of respect that simply did not exist between Jews and Samaritans in those days. So the woman expressed her amazement to Jesus only to be answered with a riddle. Jesus said, *“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink.’, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”*

Now Jesus sounds about as abrupt and obscure here with the Samaritan woman as he had been with Nicodemus, and the woman for her part is about equally obtuse. She wonders out loud that Jesus has no equipment to draw anything from a well, but then, like Nicodemus, it begins to dawn on her that Jesus has spoken to her about spiritual things: *“Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well...”*

Her answer was disputable on a number of points, but, as he had with Nicodemus talking about new birth and water and Spirit and wind, so Jesus here kept on driving the Samaritan woman toward the point of their encounter which was not about a water hole in north central Palestine. Jesus said, *“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never, ever be thirsty. The water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”*

Now there could be no question that Jesus was talking about something spiritual here, he still had no vessel, no jar to draw water from any well. But the woman was intrigued at the notion of somehow being free from thirst, so she worked with Jesus on the riddle: *“Sir, give me this water...”* she said. And here again, much like Nicodemus, the spiritual possibilities get linked to moral necessities. You may remember that Jesus had invited Nicodemus, the nobleman rabbi, to

be “*born of water*”, to head for the Jordan to make a sinner’s confession and be publicly cleansed from his sin, whatever that was.

And here Jesus invites the saucy woman with the suspect doctrine and mixed ancestry to bring her personal life out to the well for Jesus’ inspection: “*Go, call your husband and come here.*” Jesus told her. “*I have no husband,*” the woman said, which was a quick dodge from a very complicated set of facts.

But Jesus knows, he is given prophetic knowledge that she was a serial failure at marriage and had finally settled with a man for less commitment at less risk. The woman by now knew that she was in over her head and she conceded that Jesus was a prophet much as Nicodemus had said that he was a teacher.

And it’s here that John’s penchant in this gospel for sixes and sevens comes into play. The Samaritan woman had married five husbands, Jesus told her, and the man she had now was not her husband. So how many men had the woman reached for only to come up empty, without a Bridegroom? Six men. And who had just arrived at the well near her village? Only the man that John the Baptist had just declared was the Bridegroom, Jesus, the Savior to whom, John said, all God’s people belonged.

And the point the Apostle wants to make, for those with ears to hear and fingers to count, is that Jesus is that seventh bridegroom, the One sent by God to make love stick and promises work out. And the notion here is not that Jesus is going to fall in love with the Samaritan Woman and buy a little cottage in Sychar and live happily ever after. The notion is that John’s gospel, like much of Scripture, tells a story filled with women who find in Christ a sort of love, a measure of safety and healing and stability and purpose that no mere man, no fallen bridegroom could ever supply.

So Jesus appears here in Sychar not as the hero in a romance novel, but as the Bridegroom God’s people had waited for since the moment Moses had hinted in Deuteronomy 18, 1400 years before, that one day God would send “*a prophet*” who would take God’s people under his wing and explain everything that Moses had only begun to teach, “*it is to him you should listen*” Moses had said so long before.

So the Woman at the Well doesn’t say to Jesus, “At last, the man of my dreams!” She says, “*Sir*”, really, “*Lord, I perceive you are a prophet!*” And next week we’ll see that they don’t go on to talk about a little house with a picket fence in Sychar. Instead, Jesus will talk to her, like he had to Nicodemus, about the Spirit roaming to and fro, blowing back and forth, looking for people anywhere, everywhere, who will worship God “*in Spirit and in truth.*” And the point of this encounter is from what an unlikely place Jesus had sought and found a bride. Different than

the kosher, noble rabbi, the humble, selfless prophet, a lost woman who still has ears to hear and eyes to “*perceive*”.

And the point of this story, the reason John shows us a lawless Samaritan finally finding a Bridegroom she can trust, is that God is about to get busy saving people both from old Israel and from other places that no one imagined people could be saved. It is good news for those of us who have struggled to put a marriage together and make it work. It is good news for those of us from the wrong side of the tracks, who didn't get boundaries and fences and Bible with our mother's milk.

And the point here is not that boundaries and fences and Bible and truth don't matter. The point here is that we can be a long way lost, and still have Jesus come calling. That no pile of mistakes is so vast and complicated that we can't take up with Christ and have his Spirit guide us on a path where love and forgiveness, truth and holiness interact in a way that both heals and purifies us to become the people he made us to be. And a Samaritan woman will show us how that works next week!