

The Sower, the Reaper and the Unlikely Witness

Acts 1:6-11; John 4:27-42

This morning we return to that town in the Samaritan highlands where Jesus has fled from the rulers of old Israel to take an unlikely route back into Galilee, so to resume his ministry there beyond the reach of the Jerusalem authorities. So everything about this encounter which appears only in John's gospel is unlikely. Sychar, a town originally claimed and perhaps settled by Jacob himself was no longer part of Israel proper. It had been settled for some 400 years by the Samaritans, a people who claimed to know God, but really they were of suspect ancestry and they believed a fishy, lawless gospel.

So John's story began with Israel's Messiah, exhausted and dehydrated, sitting at a Samaritan well, begging for a drink from a Samaritan woman who had likely never heard a respectful word from a proper Israelite. We've already rehearsed the tensions that had to be worked through before Jesus could hope for a drop of water from a woman like this. But strangely Jesus addressed her about as respectfully and constructively as he had addressed Nicodemus, the Israelite nobleman some weeks earlier in Jerusalem. And the point here in John's gospel was that salvation was equally difficult and equally possible, no matter who you were or where you were from.

Jesus had spoken to Nicodemus about God's Spirit being like the wind, blowing here and there and saving those souls who are willing to face their sins and start over, moving and bending where the Spirit wanted them to go. Here in Samaria, Jesus spoke to the woman about God's Spirit being like water, welling up inside a person and addressing those wants and needs and lacks that leave us spiritually thirsty and needy and lost. And the woman got it! "Give me water like that!" She said to Jesus in so many words.

But just as Jesus had commanded Nicodemus to head for the Jordan to be cleansed and forgiven by the Baptist, so here Jesus requires the Samaritan woman to face and deal with what was wrong in her life. "*Go, call your husband and come here.*" Jesus told her. "*I have no husband,*" the woman answered, a true statement which didn't even begin to tell her story, but Jesus already knew.

And it's at this point that the woman begins to take Christ seriously as a "*prophet*". Out comes the ancient grievance that had prevented her and any Samaritan from ever accepting any Jewish prophet after Moses: "*Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you people say that Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.*" And here Jesus gets into hard prophecy, a word that would have shocked any Samaritan or any Jew who ever heard it: "*Believe me, woman, the day is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.*"

With Christ on the move, the old Jewish-Samaritan feud was fast becoming pointless, so Jesus moved quickly to the point of the matter. The Samaritans were wrong! "*You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.*" To be saved, to know God, the woman was going to have to be willing to be wrong. Jesus would die and rise and ascend from Jerusalem. Zion was the place where humanity would be saved, and Jesus was the Messiah who would save Jews and Samaritans alike.

And it's at that inopportune moment the disciples return with lunch. John records their shock at finding Jesus face to face with a native female, but no one says a word. The Samaritan woman knows she's not welcome, so she bolts for town, so struck by what Jesus had told her that she actually leaves her water jar there by the well! A common woman in ancient Samaria had one essential tool in life and that was her water jar. It would be like you and me leaving a car key and a credit card on the lunch counter.

John tells us why she's so beside herself. She runs back to the village and tells the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could this be the Christ?" The woman has had five husbands and a live-in lover! Her neighbors know she's not given to religious fanaticism so they listen to her, and head with her from the village square out toward Jacob's well to see what's come over this woman. "In the meantime," John tells us, the disciples are perplexed that their exhausted, dehydrated leader seems too distracted to take a meal he clearly needs.

"Rabbi, eat!" they tell him. Jesus' reply is mysterious, "I have food to eat that you don't know about." he says. The disciples begin to wonder if the woman fed Jesus in addition to speaking with him, which is a direction I don't think he wanted them to go, so he told them, "My food is to do the will of the One who sent me and to accomplish his work." They likely had no idea what he was talking about so Jesus explained. "Do you not say, 'There are yet four months and then comes harvest'?"

I expect that the proverb Jesus quotes here was taught to Jewish children to communicate that no one can rush the pace that God sets for life. Farmers must wait for a harvest, "four months" the proverb said! So we too must wait for God's promises to unfold in the world and in our lives. But then, suddenly, unexpectedly, the day comes! Jesus says to his men, "...lift up your eyes and see that the fields are white for harvest!" Farming is like that! Months and months of wait, wait, wait and then, suddenly, the fields must be reaped as fast as you can or the harvest will be lost!

And the point was that, on that day in that village, the harvest that old Israel had labored at since the days of Moses was just coming ripe and the disciples were out to lunch, in danger of missing it. So Jesus told them, "Already, the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together." In other words, at that moment, in that unlikely place, Jesus was in the field reaping what Israel had sown from the days of Moses right down through John the Baptist.

Jesus was teaching his disciples that right there, right then, they were in that unique historical moment when the reaper, Christ, had entered the field just as the sower, Israel, was leaving it, "that sower and reaper may rejoice together" Jesus said. And it turned out that there was a single generation after Christ, when old Israel would still be in the fields sowing, even as the church, new Israel, began her task of harvesting from the nations what God had promised Abraham so long before in Genesis, that "in your offspring all the nations on earth would be blessed."

And in case anyone mistook Jesus' meaning, at that moment the Samaritan stampede from the village arrived and welcomed Jesus for two days of ministry. The point being that the disciples hadn't thought that any harvesting would take place in Samaria. The Samaritans were the last

people the disciples imagined would be interested in Jesus! But in fact Jesus was more welcome in Sychar than he had been in Jerusalem or in the Jordan River valley. And what was even more interesting was who had reached the townspeople and convinced them that Jesus had a gospel worth hearing.

The disciples had been in that village square buying lunch just hours before and never thought of saying a word about the Savior sitting out at Jacob's well. Proper Israelites all, they just never imagined that the uncouth, untaught Samaritans might be the harvest Jesus was looking for. It was the woman, who'd married five men from the town and roomed with a sixth, the woman was so taken by Jesus that she thought she might do her neighbors some good, just telling them what he'd said.

Which brings me back to our Call to Worship this morning from the book of Acts. That story took place in Jerusalem, after the crucifixion, after the resurrection. Jesus had led the disciples back to the holy city where they imagined he would take the throne and rule the world and they would be wonderful and powerful for the rest of their lives. So they asked him on the road to the city, "*Is it now that you restore the kingdom to Israel?*" And Jesus' answer was, in so many words, that's none of your business, "*...times and seasons*" are "*set by the Father's authority.*" Jesus told them.

So what was their business? What is our business? Jesus went on, "*...you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you shall be my witnesses, both in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth.*" The point being that it is not necessary to be all the wonderful, impressive, compelling things so many of us imagine we have to be to do good for God.

A good witness is someone who sees or experiences something and simply, honestly reports what's happened. We don't need to be wiser, kinder, better than the people we're trying to reach to help them toward Christ. The Samaritan woman certainly wasn't. At the moment she reached her neighbors, she'd done nothing to tidy up her personal life. In fact, the gospel carefully records that her neighbors tell her something like this, "It's not because of you that we believe in this man. It's his word! We've heard for ourselves and we believe he's the Savior of the world."

The point being that our efforts to gin ourselves up into something we're not can actually obscure Christ because people perceive that it's phony. We are what we are in the moment we're called upon to speak and live for Christ, and what we should tell is the story of how wonderful Christ has been, not how wonderful we've become. The Bible is unique as a religious document precisely because it communicates so carefully the faults and sins of the people who become saints and then so entirely credits God for what they become and what they accomplish.

These people are more witnesses than they are heroes, honest about God and honest about themselves, and entirely dependent on grace to bridge the gulf between their sin and God's perfect beauty. Of course, the woman at the well will have work to do in her personal life if she wants to "*worship the Father...in Spirit and in truth*" and so will we. It is the task of any witness to incorporate in his own life the logic and the values of the Person he testifies is true and worth following. But the point is that we are inviting people to love and trust and admire Christ and not us.

It is his Word that will save peoples' souls and change peoples' lives and we can only serve him to the extent we are faithful to that.