

Today's gospel is, like last weeks, one of those great stories – great conversation, humor, and some profound truth all thrown in. Both are the sort of encounters that Jesus loved, and the disciples frowned on – it's probably one of the reasons why Nicodemus came at night: to avoid not only the hostile stares of the narrow-minded Jews but also those of Jesus' disciples! Social boundary-crossing was food for Jesus' soul – and I suspect he enjoyed poking his disciples a little too!

I think we miss the humor – it's throughout John's gospel. For instance, last week we met Nicodemus, who was intentionally obtuse – playing dumb – acting as if Jesus was speaking literally about re-birth when he clearly knew very well that Jesus was using metaphor: “reborn? That's a physical impossibility!” And Jesus fired back with more humor: “Didn't you claim to be a teacher of Israel?”

It's pretty clear that Jesus and Nicodemus knew each other well.

And, today, we have more humor, more intentional misunderstanding. When Jesus banter about “living water” the Samaritan woman makes fun of him: “I'd love to get my hands on that sort of water – then I wouldn't have to struggle up here every noon-time”!

Both of these stories also contain ‘zingers’ – for Nicodemus it was Jesus comments about the serpent/stick – a sign of healing – and the possible outcome of Jesus' presence in Jerusalem – crucifixion. His death would not be a meaningless sacrifice but a symbol of healing and wholeness, and the birth of a new humanity.

And for the Samaritan woman there were zingers also – the stuff about the number of husbands she had had.

For many centuries it was fairly standard for the Church to suggest that the woman was of ‘loose morals’ - and some conservative male biblical scholars continue to do so. But it's entirely possible that her husbands had died. Perhaps they had divorced her because she was too old, or too uppety – after all, for a woman of her time she was outrageously direct, non-deferential and downright aggressive who talked about such off-limits-to-women topics as the Messiah and the Temple.

That experience of divorce would be a good reason not to risk another marriage and be subjected to abuse. And there's nothing about sin in this conversation – nothing could, it seems, have been father from Jesus' mind!

Jesus' comment “go tell your husband” most likely meant that he knew about her; his second comment, about the 5 husbands, was to say he knew a lot more about her than she thought.

As with Nicodemus, Jesus' words were an invitation to “get serious”

And the Samaritan woman does get serious – she starts to talk about ancient disputes.

Samaritans – as you know – were Jews. When the Jews returned from exile in Babylon over 500 years before they found Jerusalem – and, especially, the Temple – in ruins. Some of them wanted to rebuild – Isaiah was the prophet of rebuilding, encouraging them amid the ruin to see the future glory of God’s grace in a 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple.

Other returning Jews believed that the destruction of the 1<sup>st</sup> Temple was a sign of displeasure from God, and that to rebuild was to flaunt God’s will and risk God’s anger.

That other group of Jews decided that they should build a new Temple somewhere else – and they did, on Mt. Gerizim – a site they chose because of it’s ancient Jewish roots as a shrine. Archaeologists say the Samaritan Temple was as grand and expansive as the Temple in Jerusalem, though it was destroyed about 150 years before Jesus and the Samaritan women talked.

So here are two Jews – Judean and Samaritan – talking. Think Protestant and Catholic believers a couple of hundred years after the Reformation and you get the idea.

The woman notes the destruction of the Samaritan Temple “we used to worship on this mountain”; and then repeats what must have been an irksome Judean claim – that the Samaritans should see the destruction of their temple as a sign from God and return to Jerusalem! Notice, that’s exactly the claim made by the Samaritans!

So Judean Jews engaged in “in your face” diatribe! Since Jesus has said nothing about this, the comment she makes that “you say that the place that people must worship is in Jerusalem” must be addressed to “you Judean Jews” not “you, Jesus”. This is bordering on racism.

Old wounds!

But Jesus is not drawn into an argument. In reply he says the thing that really stops the woman in her tracks: “No, I’m not suggesting that – in fact the time is coming when the temple will be irrelevant – true worship will be in spirit and truth.

This is the most extensive piece about worship in John’s gospel. To worship God as God wants is to worship in Spirit. To pick up on the earlier metaphor of living water, worship is with the Spirit that Jesus offers gushing up from the heart, and in truth, which we will later understand to be embodied in Jesus himself (8:31-32; 14:6).

Worship, John is reminding us, is about relationship, dwelling in the vine Jesus, not empty ritual.

And relationship is what happens here – the Samaritan woman has entered into relationship with Jesus. She suggests in her roundabout way that he is the coming Messiah, and for the first and only time in John, Jesus says that he is. That’s pretty remarkable – that he says it only once, that he says it to a non-Judean Jew, and he says it to a woman! That’s boundary-crossing in spades!

Jesus not only speaks directly to her, but honors her with a personal invitation to believe. She

responds with the awareness that he knows her past and does not hold it against her. She drops her bucket and returns to town telling everybody that she feels differently about herself, because of this “man” who might be the Christ.

It would be easy to theologize this passage, but at its most basic level it has a profound message for us: **it's not about what we know but who we know.** It is about having an encounter, experiencing the light of Jesus' truth and love shining on our past and our future, and then having the courage and the wherewithal to drop anything that isn't that light and that truth and that love and go share what we know (not what someone else knows, just what we know) as witnesses to God's abundant grace gushing up to eternal life in us.

Go forth and do good in relationship with others, and you will have understood Jesus' words today!