

The Woman at the Well. John 3: 1-17. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland 3/23/14
Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Today's gospel – the conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan women at Jacob's Well – isn't a "stand-alone" story. We can't look at it without also considering Nicodemus and comparing the two. In fact I'd go as far as to say that you can't understand and appreciate Nicodemus' role in John's Gospel without hearing the story of the Woman at the Well.

Who was Nicodemus? He was, most obviously, a man. He was a Judean Jew, a Rabbi (which is to say a teacher about the things of God), and thus, someone who would have standing in the community, who would be seen as upright, a good moral example.

Where were he and Jesus? In Jerusalem, meaning on the "mountain" which was the site of the Judean Temple. You might say that such a location suggested "mainstream, traditional religion" to John's readers.

What did Nicodemus do in the story? He encountered Jesus at night – perhaps (and this is a clue!) We might say "at midnight"; he engaged in a serious dialogue with Jesus in which he misunderstood the deeper things of what Jesus was saying, and he went away, unconvinced, not understanding what Jesus was implying, in no way transformed. He did not come back. His encounter had no effect on anyone else, he didn't carry away any words of life to share with others.

Nicodemus is not self-reflective, nor open to the possibility that God was coming to him to transform him. But at least he was open to the encounter.

Who was the Samaritan woman? She was, most obviously, a woman. She was a Samaritan Jew, she was not a rabbi, (not a teacher about the things of God), not only did she not have standing in the community, she stood out as a shining example of how not to live a life in accord with the teachings of the ancestors – not upright, not a good moral example.

Where were she and Jesus? "On this mount" meant Mount Gehizim, the site of the Samaritan Temple. You might say that such a location suggested a community open to thinking outside the religious box, beyond "traditional religion" to John's readers.

What did the woman do in the story? She encountered Jesus at midday. She engaged in a bantering dialogue with Jesus in which she pretended to misunderstand the deeper things Jesus was saying - though she clearly understood what he was implying. She went away transformed, carrying away words of life to share with others.

She did come back, and she brought her whole village with her, despite her reputation – in other words, what she said to them was so compelling that they came to Jesus in spite of who she was to them.

The woman is highly self-reflective, clearly open to the possibility that God was coming to her to

transform her. She was not only open to the encounter, but open to the possibilities it offered.

The juxtaposition of these stories is obviously no accident!

– This is one more example of the proclamation of the Good News to both men and women - there's not only an underpinning of radical equality and inclusion in the words of the earliest Christian writers, that underpinning was recommended to the early Christian communities. And I mean that plural "writers" – it's not just John. Mark is way out in front of John, and Luke and Matthew are keeping up with him..

– The thing is, though, that this story isn't only about proclamation to men and women – in this case the men and women of the Samaritan Jewish village – it's about proclamation BY a woman to men and women of the Samaritan Jewish village. Here is one of the first great evangelists, and she's a woman!

This is a story that shouts loudly about the way things should be, in the peaceable kingdom, where social standing, gender, moral stiffness count for little compared to transformative relationship, compassion, humor, love.

This is also a story about the re-creation of a community of compassion, humor and love that's predicated on the welcome of all, no matter race, gender, sexual orientation, or past failings.

As we journey toward the renewal of our baptismal vows at Easter, one of the answers to "why follow Jesus" comes boldly from this story of the meeting at the well – that our faith promises a way of living that is wholesome, inclusive, and promises those gifts of transformative relationship, compassion, humor, and love. May they all be yours now. Amen.