

Lent 3, March 19, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland. John 4:5-42
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Every Sunday when we pray for those who have died I always remember a list of people. One stands out for me: Olive. Olive was a seminary class mate who died of a brain tumor during my final year at seminary.

Every human life is precious, the more so since life's so transitory: death comes to all of us, every precious one. It's particularly tragic, though, when the grim reaper visits the young – Olive was 31, and boy did she pack in a lot during those 31 years! She was one remarkable woman. Olive was preparing for ordained life in the Methodist Church (my seminary was a joint Anglican/Methodist college). She was one of those people that everyone wanted to know, wanted to be around. She was incredibly intelligent, outward-going, extravert, compassionate, fearless, self-confident, secure in herself, funny and beautiful– she had it all.

Unlike quite a few of our classmates, Olive was both single and not in a relationship, which is not to say that she hadn't dated before. She used to joke that the playing field was empty for her because she seemed to scare off most men, who weren't used to such an impressive, self-confident woman. "It'll take a very special guy....." she used to say, leaving the rest of the sentence for us to figure out. But we knew what to put there: "a special guy who could keep up, a special guy who was secure with a super-smart, quick, self-confident woman"....you get the picture. In an age in England where "men are men and women are girls" we all knew it would be a challenge for a woman as remarkable as Olive.

In our patriarchal culture if you're not white, straight, and male, you have to be truly exceptional to be noticed – and even then, the idea of being treated equally isn't often on the table. Of course, most men don't know this; all women know it!

In human history, even exceptional women don't get noticed; only truly remarkable, head-and-shoulders-above-everyone-else (man or woman) women get noticed. I think it's because they are so remarkable that it's impossible to ignore them!

In Christian history I think of women like St. Brigid of Kildare, who somewhere in the mid-to-late 400's was consecrated as a bishop by Bishop Mel of Ardagh. Mel used the Bishop's Consecration Service rather than the one to make her an abbess, which got Rome's attention! When challenged about this he said, essentially "the Holy Spirit made me do it." Based on her life story, you can see why he did that – she was a truly amazing woman. But even with her we forget that St. Patrick is not uniquely the patron saint of Ireland – he shares that title with her and St. Columba. She falls into the highest category: an exceptional, truly remarkable, head-and-shoulders-above-everyone-else (man or woman) woman

Then there's Hildegard of Bingen, the twelfth century German Benedictine abbess, writer, composer, philosopher, Christian mystic, and visionary. Her abilities put her in a category that in historical studies has been used to describe a particular type of person: "Renaissance Man." Of course, she was ahead of her time by several hundred years, and she was a woman – I wonder

exactly what she might have been able to do if she had been a man? And that's the point, of course. She falls into the highest category: an exceptional, truly remarkable, head-and-shoulders-above-everyone-else (man or woman) woman.

And so we come today's gospel. What a wonderful story - one of my favorites! The waters of life will never run dry, we're told; they come from God's Spirit moving through our spirits. It's a profound message - but it's not the only profound message the story contains; the other has to do with the Samaritan woman herself.

I believe the Samaritan woman falls into that highest category I just described: an exceptional, truly remarkable, head-and-shoulders-above-everyone-else (man or woman) woman. In a highly patriarchal society like that of the 1st Century Middle East, few men would not have been intimidated by her. I sometimes wonder if even Jesus didn't feel just a little intimidated!

Most biblical scholars have - until perhaps the last 40 years - been men. And they have tended to do what men do when faced with such remarkable women: they've treated her as an object. Many have thoughtlessly denigrated this woman's moral integrity. They have taken Jesus' reference to "married 5 times" and "the one you have now is not your husband" quite literally to suggest she was a 'loose woman,' someone who didn't have the commitment to stay in a marriage, someone who, now, was scandalously living with someone who she wasn't married to.

Can we look behind John's curtain? Can we excavate down to the bottom layer of the tradition where this story is concerned? I believe we can. First, we have to recognize that one of the Gospel writer John's intentions is to show Jesus as divine, all-seeing, all-knowing. If you read only the words, Jesus sure comes across like that: he magically knows that the woman has been married five times, and so on. The story doesn't sound real.

Behind John's deifying of Jesus there's another story. It starts out with Jesus being a little arrogant - "give me water to drink" - but then he very quickly discovers he's talking with someone who isn't in awe of him, and who isn't about to do what he says just because it's him saying it. What develops is an encounter between two people who understand each other and who enjoy their exchange. The Samaritan woman 'gets' what Jesus is talking about right away AND she comes right back at him, treating him as her equal - not many people in the gospels can do that with Jesus - in fact I can't think of one. And I suspect no other man ever treated this woman in this way either - as an equal; Jesus respected her, and in return she respected him, recognized how rare a person he was to act in this way toward her.

Compare this exchange with last week's gospel, where Nicodemus completely fails to understand Jesus' metaphorical reference to being "born from above."

And then we get to the bit about the 5 husbands. Don't do what so many biblical scholars have done with this exchange - instead look for the down-to-earth reality of what's going on. I think a perfectly legitimate way of reading this is to hear Jesus say to this woman something like this: "You know, you're a really remarkable woman - I'm guessing most men can't keep up with you! In fact I'll bet the ones who married you tried to control you and found out they couldn't, so they

divorced you. Maybe four or five tried it. And then you got fed up with that treatment, so now you won't marry." That's the sort of very human insight that Jesus was so good at!

The rest of the conversation goes the same way – this woman recognizes in Jesus a person of rare insight, profound knowledge, and of genuine respect for her. No wonder she wanted to bring others to meet him!

This is a very different way of looking at this text than the traditional one, isn't it?! The "default" view of the story is revealed as patronizing, and paternalistic. There's a sort of well-meaning pity that traditional biblical scholarship has taken toward this women, because it had only one single story to operate out of, one lens to view her through – the dominant male story. And since we've not been taught to engage stories like this from more than that perspective, we miss a significant part of what's going on.

Jesus, too, is doing something that it's easy to miss – talking with a non-relative woman who's a hated foreigner that most of Jesus' contemporaries would have considered impure and spiritually inferior – this is boundary-crossing behavior entirely out of keeping with traditional male Jewish behavior.

Yes, the waters of life will never run dry; they come from God's Spirit moving through our spirits. And they'll never run dry not only for us and people like us, they'll never run dry for people not like us. These waters refresh us all regardless of where we've been on life's journey. And they'll refresh those not like us too, regardless of where they've been on life's journey.

Today, of course, that truth's lost on us because we don't understand the significance of a Samaritan Jew and a Judean Jew talking to each other, nor an unrelated man and women doing so without a chaperone. Today, perhaps, the closest equivalent would be the chief Rabbi of Israel talking with the chief Ayatollah of Iran, treating each other with mutual respect as equals.

Next week I'm going to the Redmond Mosque with other Christian and Jewish leaders at the invitation of the Muslim Association of Puget Sound. So it's a good week for me to hear this story! Actually, it's always a good week to hear this story! Especially in Lent, when we're all called to reevaluate how we're living and change those things that are holding us back from fully living the Gospel of Jesus Christ.