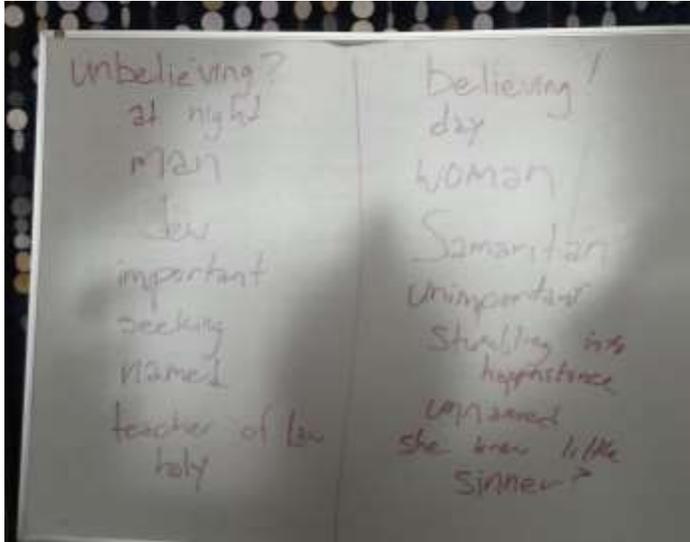


She & I AM (4Feb18)
John 4:3-29,39-42

Here's a little project a few of us already got to work on in Bible study. This Bible reading is regularly seen as a contrast or paired story with the one we heard last week of Nicodemus. So if you can recall last week's reading (and listened today), we could make a chart comparing the differences of the two:



That list helps us to see the place of this woman.

Now, we recall that Nicodemus was displaced from the center: he didn't have an advantage in understanding Jesus or receiving blessing from him. Nevertheless, we end up feeling that Nicodemus was the insider, and this unnamed Samaritan woman the absolute outsider. Such a system that would label the man more directly the insider maintains a damaging patriarchy that makes presumptions to exclude this woman.

We continue to live into a better world with the #MeToo and Time's Up movements against sexual abuse by powerful male perpetrators, as these continue to change the systems and change the perspective of many people, especially those who were too apt to distrust a woman's accusations, to sweep harmful behavior under a rug, to favor predators over the innocent.

But those rotten stereotypes have often figured into this story, too. Nicodemus becomes an honestly seeking good guy, while the Samaritan

woman must be the bad girl. We have too many terms for a woman who has been through five husbands and now is living with someone else, and all of those terms are singularly disparaging to the woman and ignorant of the man.

It echoes the story of the woman caught in adultery later in the Gospel of John. That story won't be in the Narrative Lectionary this year, and isn't in our other Sunday Bible readings, either. Yet we know this story about a woman who is about to be put to death until Jesus says, "Let one without sin cast the first stone." The story illustrates that none of us is perfect (while still feeling like that woman is less perfect). But what is much too rarely noticed is why it's only a woman there. How did they catch her in adultery but not catch the man she was with?! It's a story that is based in treating the woman as the worse or even sole offender.

So it's worth the pause today to notice that Jesus never talks with this woman about sin or forgiveness. He doesn't accuse or address moral behavior. Instead of presuming she has bad character, we could think about those five husbands plus one in other ways. It could be that all five have died. Her interest in connecting with Jesus may not be because she has a guilty conscience. Her difficulty could be mortality, and not morality. And maybe rather than shacking up and living in sin with her current boyfriend, her brother or a brother-in-law might have been willing to take care of her in a society where being a single woman was almost a death sentence.

For that matter, we need to remember that even if the issue was serial divorce, in that culture divorce couldn't be initiated by the woman. So it would have been that five husbands had all dismissed her, put her out on the street, left her at risk. Again, rather than seeing this Samaritan woman as the sinful perpetrator, we very likely should understand her to be the victim of the injustice.

Jesus reaches out to her.

And he reaches out in a phenomenal way. This passage portrays what Paul said in his letter

to the Galatians, that “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are...heirs according to the promise” (3:28-29). All of the dividing walls, the barriers, the thoughts that would exclude this woman, that would denigrate her, that would keep her out, that would say she didn’t have as good of place as Nicodemus or any man or any insider or anybody, all of that is simply undone by Jesus, who offers her himself.

Even more, phenomenally, Jesus offers himself to her more than any other: her conversation with Jesus is the longest recorded dialogue anybody gets to have with him in the Bible.

If the quantity of the conversation *still* doesn’t seem phenomenal, well...I have to admit I can’t keep up with this woman’s theological acumen and her faithful pondering, her persistence and arrival at astonishing belief. She may not have been seeking him, but she can keep up.

For starters, if I met someone who “told me everything I’ve ever done,” I’d be reluctant to continue the conversation. I’m more private and don’t want anybody to know me that well. And I sure as shootin’ wouldn’t go tell the whole town to come meet the guy who knows everything about me. I’d want to keep that guy pretty tightly under wraps.

For this telling and inviting to Jesus, Nicodemus never gets anywhere near serving as an evangelist like this. Even though he pops up twice more in the story, neither time does he convey anything remotely this faithful. Once, Nicodemus’s colleagues ask if anyone believes in Jesus, and the most he will reply is that Jesus should get a fair trial. He shows up again after the crucifixion with 100 pounds of embalming oils, clearly not looking for the resurrection, but evidently wanting to be sure Jesus gets good and buried, stays good and dead.

Besides the eventual outcome, where this woman manages to help bring her whole town to Jesus—meaning not only that he transcended the

barrier to make her no longer an outsider but she also brought others in—besides that, simply her tenacity in trying to understand is phenomenal.

Starting with Jesus asking for a drink, she already presses against the pious cultural conventions and wonders about the systems of exclusion, Jewish man versus Samaritan woman.

Then he goes on to talk about living water. Now, that term could simply apply to running water. It could mean that Jesus knows where there’s a good stream, or a drinking fountain. She observes that he has no bucket, which may seem a bit facile, sort of a no-brainer, but it signals to me that she’s trying to track the conversation, to get ahold of this life that he’s offering. Nicodemus by this point had thrown up his hands and simply asked, “How can these things be?” and given up on engaging Jesus, deciding this life was too obscure.

Yet for the woman, somehow she’s able to keep chasing it down so that she can throw a question back at Jesus, again about being labeled an outsider, a question about what counts as appropriate worship, about whether it needs to be in the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus speaks on behalf of his Jewish heritage (again reminding us that, though the Gospel of John tries to parse the relationship of followers of Jesus to their Jewish heritage, the Gospel is not and should not be read as anti-Jewish).

Still, Jesus goes on to locate worship not as bound to a certain location, but in himself, not a place but a person. Not a building from which we can be kept out but a person who brings you in. Worship isn’t about where we go but *who* finds us. This is what we heard in the cleansing of the temple story, and also what we heard last fall in the burning bush, where God revealed Godself as I AM, God’s identity as I AM.

Here for the first time in the Gospel of John, Jesus also declares I AM. We’ll get more through Lent as he shapes our understanding: I AM the bread from heaven, I AM the light of the world, I AM the vine and you are the branches, I AM the way, the truth, and the life, I AM the good shepherd, the gate, I AM the resurrection and the

life. Here it is unqualified, nothing more than the straight full identity: I AM. This is the God that Jesus is revealing.

This week I'm noticing that I AM can never allow God to be turned into an object, cannot objectify God or make God other. It's nonsense to turn I AM around to "You are" or even "You are I AM." It makes no sense. This identity won't work in those ways. Neither for othering I AM can you talk about I AM as a description. You can't go back and tell others "Hey, I met I AM." Jesus can only self-reveal. And we can only repeat, Jesus said, "I AM."

That first person identification also means in some way that God is the subject of all verbs. I AM will not even allow us to serve or worship as if we were in control, because you can't serve I AM. It doesn't make sense to worship I AM (unless you're very egotistical). I don't think this is only playing linguistic games with this name; in this case language is highlighting a God who is always the root, the core, the source, our fundamental basis, apart from whom no one and nothing exists, and in which we all must dwell. And none can be separate from that. It is impossible to leave outsiders. Apart from I AM there is no being. So we must be joined in I AM.

If you're wondering about all of this, if you're a little perplexed...well, I'm with you. Like a bush that burns without burning up, it's inexplicable. I probably don't explain it well because I can't quite grasp it myself. I can't map out what we do about Jesus as God and God in Jesus, and how we fit into God's identity. So I may be the young white male. I may be the trained professional. I may be the insider to these sorts of questions.

But this Samaritan woman certainly did better than I do. I keep looking for words, turning it over, trying to define, feeling confused. She pursued the question, then she went to testify: come and meet the one. Whatever it was, she recognized that she was no longer an outsider, could not be, that there was nothing that left her out, neither any possible sin, nor injustice, nothing of how society had treated her could finally

marginalize her. She was found by existence and life itself. She was brought to the center, and so she pointed others, too, to their true identity with I AM.