Unexpected Jesus Series – Week 5 John 4:4-42
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We know this story, right? We know about her and her life. We know the point of the story. Right? If that were true I likely wouldn't have needed to write a sermon for this morning. Many of us understand the story in ways that were handed down to us a long time ago. A preacher somewhere at some point, a Bible Study one afternoon, a book borrowed from the church library… all these things shape the story for us. And that story is likely this one: a woman goes to the well alone, at noon, because the "respectable" women of the community will have nothing to do with her. Afterall, she's been married five times and is living, unmarried, with a man. She meets Jesus at the well, he asks for a cup of water, and starts a conversation that ends up uncovering her "sin" so that she can finally be forgiven and set free by Jesus. I mean, this is the most common understanding of the story. Maybe you've heard it this way. Heck, I may have actually preached it that way at one time. But today, we are going to change our view, and look to the unexpected that happens in this story. Today we are going to set that version down at the edge of the well with the woman's water jar, and listen to what the text actually says.

Like so many women in our scripture, our main character has no name. At least in the Protestant tradition, she has no name beyond "the Samaritan woman at the well" or "the Samaritan woman" which is more descriptor than name. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, however, she is known as Photine. Her name means "luminous one." More than that, she's a saint, Saint Photina of Samaria and is given the title "equal to the Apostles" just like Mary Magdalene and Thekla. Photine's hagiography, the stories told about saints like her that are told with a whole lotta love and not a lot of critical skepticism, tell us that she was present in the upper room on the day of Pentecost – she saw the flames and heard the tongues. She was sent to Carthage and North Africa by the disciples to do missionary work. And apparently she stood before Emperor Nero and even spat in his face. Not surprising that she ended up being tortured and martyred for her faith.

Is this historical fact? Probably not. But it is legend and tradition. The thing is, for whatever reason, the early church remembered this woman… not as a cautionary tale used to scare new Christians into good behavior, but rather as a woman who was a teacher, a leader and a valued disciple of Jesus. To this day, in order to visit the Well of Jacob in the West Bank (where this story is said to have happened), you have to go through the Church of Saint Photina. So maybe there is something more to this Woman at the Well. To honour her, I am going to use the name Photine for the rest of the sermon this morning.

As I was reading Sarah Bessey's thoughts about Photine's story, I came across this nugget of wisdom that got my brain going. She wrote: Sometimes we are taught one particular way to read the stories of scripture, and in our innocence – maybe our indoctrination or because of the agenda of others, we believe that way is the only way. We elevate the way we were introduced to a story above the actual story itself." For instance let's look at when Photine shows up at the well. What time is it? Noon. The hottest, sunniest time of the day. Why then? Scripture is stubbornly silent about the why, but commentators are not. The favorite theory is that she arrives when she knows no one else will be around, because the woman of the village wouldn't have anything to do with her. She is an outcast, a pariah, and therefore is to be judged and isolate.

This could be true, and could another thousand other good and very ordinary reasons for the woman to arrive when she did. Maybe she got caught up visiting with a neighbour or was doing laundry or was waiting for bread to bake. Here's another option… maybe it was an intentional choice on the part of the author. Back in Chapter 3, we meet the powerful and influential Nicodemus who meets with Jesus at midnight, the darkest time of night, to talk theology in an alleyway. He has his conversation and then we never know what he does with the information he's given. Then in chapter 4, we meet Photine and Jesus in the full light of day, out in the open, and there's a deep theological conversation. She believes what Jesus tells her and she turns, runs into to town and tells everyone about what happened. According to tradition, she lived out her life following Jesus. Looking at it that way, maybe arriving at noon isn't a mark of shame but is a spotlight.

What about her five husbands? The text doesn't give us much to work with here either. But that hasn't stopped people from assuming that's she "loose" or promiscuous. She's been described like that for centuries, but not by the scripture. The Women's Bible Commentary warns us against the explanation of moral laxity for her situation. Maybe, it says, that Photine isn't a loose woman, but is a woman trapped in the tradition of leverite marriage where she was passed along the men in a family and abandoned when the last man refused her. Maybe she was widowed, or divorced (which could only be instigated by the man). When commentators and interpreters call her amoral and promiscuous they aren't telling us about the text but about their own biases and prejudices. Biblical scholar Caryn A Reed concludes that "her marital story was simply the consequence of her time and place."

So what does Jesus think of Photine? This is where the unexpectedness of Jesus hits: he never once corrects her or shames her in the conversation. He never invites her to repent or seek forgiveness. And let's be clear, friends, Jesus is never shy about calling people to repent! He never offers to forgive her either… he doesn't mention the marriages to shame her but rather to prove his identity as prophet. Jesus is simply trying to help Photine to know who HE is. So if Jesus never saw her as anything but her true self, why would we?

If we step back from the lingering assumptions about Photine, we begin to see her differently. What comes to the forefront then is her intelligence, her initiative, her courage to wade into the theological disputes and historical wounds between her people and Jesus'. Once she recognizes him as prophet, she starts to talk about and question the divide between them, the theological otherness.

And Jesus takes her seriously. In fact, this is the longest recorded conversation Jesus has in all the four gospels. And something ridiculously important happens in this conversation. Jesus tells Photine that worship isn't about where it happens, it's about who you are and how you live. One must bring their whole selves just as they are to worship. Photine responds to Jesus saying "maybe all that's above you and me, hey? Someday the Messiah will come and we'll get the whole story"

To which Jesus says: "I am he. You don't need to wait any longer."

This is the BIG FREAKING DEAL moment for this is the first time Jesus ever says this and it's to a Samaritan woman at a well at high noon… the unexpected Jesus stuns again.

People of faith, like you and I, have been told throughout history and in a variety of ways that we shouldn't question God, that we shouldn't rock the boat, and we shouldn't look behind the proverbial curtain. And in one simple story, Jesus shows us different. God is not the Wizard of Oz. Jesus wants us to know that God wants your questions, your doubts, your certainties… wrestling with our faith, building a relationship with God this way isn't problematic or irritating. God wants you as you are. And if Jesus is right about it. God enjoys us, just as we are.

This story isn't and never has been about forgiveness of sins. It is about belonging, about relationship, about connection. The location of this story would have been deeply meaningful for those hearing it for traditionally wells are places of covenant, especially marriage covenant. Jacob meets Rachel at one. Isaac's wife Rebekah is found at one. Maybe we're meant to see that some sort of covenant, a deeper relationship was just beginning between Jesus and Photine's people.

And when Photine finally gets Jesus, she leaves her water jar behind and runs into town. Catholic Sister Christine Valdimiroff points out that Photine did the same thing that the dsiciples did… they left their nets and tax booths to announce the good news. Photine was on par with them. And her village listens to her. Why else would they go looking for Jesus, unless they believed her and respected her?

Jesus ends up spending two whole days in Samaria with Photine's people. This is also a big deal, friends, for while hospitality in those days was prized it was almost never freely given between Jews and Samaritans. For Jesus and his disciples to stay mean eating, staying and teaching with Samaritan people, which was completely unheard of for Jesus' Jewish contemporaries. Jesus didn't care about human created boundaries of who's in and who's out.

Photine is not a cautionary character for people to learn from. She is invited into the gospel story and in the end becomes a disciple in her own right because she encounters Jesus and convincingly shares the story with others so that they go and seek Jesus themselves. This isn't a story about a sinner being forgiven, this is about a person being included and it's an inclusion that goes beyond centuries of conflict. As Bessey says: "when we focus on a misreading of her sexual history or her character, we erase what is actually a beautiful story of God's expanding borders and generous heart for the Other. "

Jesus welcomes all of us to the well, in the bright light of high noon, with all our baggage and with all the things people have assumed of you, and he will offer you a cup of cool water and an unending love that makes you feel at home. Jesus meets us where we are, as we have been and as we will be, welcoming our questions and our certainties, taking each one seriously. We are included in the expansiveness of God's love and that is where we belong.

Thanks be to God.