

Stories that Matter by Pastor Leah Rosso
Lent 3, John 4
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In his book, *The Christian Imagination*, Rev. Dr. Willie Jennings shared a story that stuck in his memory about a summer day in Grand Rapids, MI. He and his mother, Mary, were out in the backyard in their garden, where she often was found tending to the plants and the soil. On this specific occasion, he looked up to see that two white men in suits were walking along the alley, approaching them. He remembers thinking he should call out to alert his Mother, and then she was there, putting her body between these two strange men and her twelve year old black son. The two men introduced themselves, and in a speech that was obviously rehearsed, one of them began to talk about their church across the street- the kinds of programs they had for kids and what they were hoping to do in the neighborhood. The other missionary grew tired of his colleague's long speech and so he pivoted, turning to talk to Willie. But that too seemed premeditated, for as he began to talk to Willie as though he was a small child, he crouched down too far and was basically looking straight at Willie's naval. The whole thing seemed so strange to Willie, not only because these two men didn't belong in his backyard, but because his mother was Mary Jennings, one of the pillars of New Hope Missionary Baptist Church down the street. Not once did these two men ask her about *her* faith; not once did they inquire about whether she went to church; not once did they seek to find out anything about this strong, compassionate woman who led basically every church activity, right along with her sister, Martha, and who were as close to their scriptural counterparts as one could get. It was obvious to Willie at that time, and all the years later as he reflected on that experience, just how removed our faith can get from actually showing up for our neighbor.

I share this story not only because I think it's important for all people of faith to be challenged with a story like that, but because I think that those two men saw themselves as being like Jesus. So often our story this morning, about Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well, has been told exactly as Jennings described his experience that summer morning - as a story in which Jesus shows up to a woman who is oppressed by her society and then, in a patronizing way, educates her about what God is doing, and by the end she is enlightened and perhaps even saved. And sometimes, in order to really hear a story in a new way, we need to recognize the blinders we have on and the cultural colonizing narrative we even inadvertently project onto these stories because of our own religious trauma. But when we can name what is not happening in the story, we have a chance to set aside that lens and to actually meet Jesus and the woman at the well.

Eunjoo Kim, in her book, *Preaching Jesus*, lays out a very different way to read this story. She points out that in the other three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is thrust into the wilderness right after he is baptized, as a kind of test and temptation and trial to get through in order to see that he is the Messiah. But in the Gospel of John, Jesus doesn't have that experience. Instead, it is here, with the woman at the well that he responds to three major tests.

The first question the woman has for Jesus, after Jesus has told her to get him some water, is to ask Jesus, "Why do you ask me for water?" It's not a question of "why me?" in the traditional sense, but rather we are given an explanation that Jews and Samaritans do not interact with each other. It's why the story of the Good Samaritan is so powerful - because of the hatred often held between these two groups in their long shared history of battles and conquests. And Jesus answers her question by talking about living water - water that he says is available to her. Not only does Jesus indicate to her that the barrier between Samaritans and Judeans doesn't matter to him, but Jesus shows that he wants to break the boundaries that

humans and cultures have put in place to dehumanize one another, and instead to share what gives life.

The second matter that is brought up is when Jesus asks her to get her husband and she says she has no husband. Jesus goes on to acknowledge that she does not have a typical story, but commends her for her honesty, in a story that is vulnerable and full of harm. He shows her respect and care in this mutual conversation, bridging the gap between them and connecting with her. And rather than backing down, or closing up from shame, Jesus' encouragement of her honesty seems to embolden her, for it is then that she asks him about the proper place to worship. She is referring to the argument between the Judeans who thought people could only worship God at the temple, and the Samaritans who thought you could only worship God on the mountain top. In other words, she wants to know from this strange man who doesn't follow the status quo, what he thinks about the main controversy between their religious and cultural identities. And here Jesus responds by telling her that these things that separate Judeans and Samaritans won't last forever. That they're man-made, and there will come a time when everyone will worship God in spirit and in truth, rather than in these religions bound by rules of the privileged. The whole conversation is one of mutual dialogue, recognizing their identities, naming the boundaries that are threatening to separate them, and then sharing in the love of God that pulls them back together again.

Jesus invites us to get outside of ourselves, to push past the boundaries that we have so carefully crafted and been taught to build, and instead to listen to one another; to hear each others' stories; to recognize when the roles and stereotypes of each other don't fit at all, and then to mobilize love into being the body of Christ in ways we haven't even imagined we could be.

I remember in seminary someone brought up the question of what happens when the church stops being the church in the world. What happens when those who are supposed to be following Jesus get caught up in their own doings, like those two missionaries, who could only see the prize of getting this woman and her son to go to their space, rather than to realize that as faithful people they might have something in common that they could build upon. And the answer we kept coming back to, is that the Bible shows us time and again that God's Spirit will move in whoever will listen - that those who are following Jesus best, may not even know Jesus by name at all, but God will work through them to be the church.

Our Bishop, Lanette Plambeck, recently shared her reflections on marching in Washington DC for immigrants' rights. She went, as a Bishop of the United Methodist Church, but she was deeply moved by the disparate people who came together to march. There were church people - lay and clergy from both the United Methodist Church and other denominations. But there were also interfaith partners; community allies; elected officials; and some people who just wanted to show up with respect and courage to help stand with their neighbors. She described how, as they arrived to the Methodist church building, it was quickly apparent that there was no room inside — rivers of people were flowing in and out of the church and were being directed to the overflow site; and then to a second overflow site as that one filled up. And as she marched she watched as people overflowed into the streets to bear witness that we are stronger together. And she thought about how inconvenient overflow is - taking extra grace, extra coordination, extra patience, extra communication - and yet knowing that this overflow of all different people from all different places with all different problems showing up to march together is what love looks like when it refuses to shrink.

I can't tell you what Jesus knew or didn't know about how his interactions would shape and grow a movement of love. Did he know the Samaritan woman would run back to her village and tell everyone about the love and respect she had encountered? Did he know that she was a leader in her community, shown by the fact that people believed her and came to see for

themselves? I don't know. But I do know that geographically, he didn't have to walk through Samaria to get from Jerusalem to Galilee. In fact, as the story goes on, we know that his disciples would've rathered he skipped what they may have called this God-forsaken area. But Jesus walked out of his way to interact with people who weren't like him on purpose— to build connection, to share hope, to transcend the boundaries that seemed unbreakable. And he does it whether he will make an impact in that moment or not.

So why does this story matter? I think it matters because in this lengthy conversation, which is double the amount of verses used to tell the entire Christmas story, we see what God is really up to - bringing life and dignity and joy wherever people open themselves up to it. This is what hope looks like; this is what God's Spirit sounds like— a woman feeling seen and running back to her community to share the good news. This is what joy does - it bubbles over until people are overflowing the streets to go see the good news.

In a world so bent on violence and war and control and dominance, it is more important than ever that we remember who we are following — the One who came as a vulnerable baby; the boy who sought out wisdom and knowledge in the Temple; the Christ who took time to look people in the eye; to listen to their stories; to open his heart and transcend his societal barriers in order to share the love of God; the humility of the Holy Spirit; the generosity of our Creator. This is who we are called to emulate and to follow.

Part of the reason we wanted to read these stories from the Peace Table Bible this Lent is not just because we are giving our 3rd Graders these Bibles, but also because these stories are so intense and so long! Last week when we explored Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, the religious leader, it was 21 verses, which, when translated from the Greek and not written in our modern way of telling stories, can seem long. This week's story of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is twice that length - 42 verses. To give you a comparison, the entire Christmas story with Mary and Joseph and the angels and the shepherds and the inn with no room — that whole story is only 20 verses.

So we know that this is an important story. It takes time. There's a lot of back and forth, of questions, and some answers, and more than that, there is a relationship being formed.

If you were here last week you may remember the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus, a religious leader, in which Jesus uses the metaphor of understanding God's Kingdom by being born from above, and Nicodemus is very literal and doesn't get what Jesus is talking about. This is not unique to Nicodemus. In fact, the author of John time and time again emphasizes what people don't understand to drive home Jesus' points about what is true. We see it again today. This time, however, it is Jesus who approaches the woman; it is Jesus who asks a question;

I encourage you to read it at home because there's a lot in there. If you don't have a Bible at home, find one in our church Library and take it home.

There are a couple of things to note about this story right off the bat. First, there is a contrast that the writer of John is setting up for us between the conversation last week, with Nicodemus, and the conversation today with the Samaritan woman. Nicodemus approached Jesus, Jesus approaches the Samaritan woman. Nicodemus comes at night, seeming not to want to be seen; Jesus approaches the woman at Noon at a public well.

But even with these contrasts, there is also a symmetry to the two stories: Jesus speaks in metaphorical terms, and both Nicodemus and the woman stumble because they take things too literally.

Jesus invites them both into relationship with God in a new way; and Jesus connects what he is saying to them, with the broader scope of humanity, trying to bring them along to see just how big God's grace and life and love is.