

Other

Take a minute and be scandalized by this story. I don't know what you will need to do to get there, and I don't really want to start inventing prejudices for you to have, but I want you to picture the most inappropriate person you can possibly imagine, whatever that is in your own mind. If you actually have a person that you haven't been able to forgive for some slight, think of them. If you harbor some sort of prejudice against a certain type of person, think of that. You don't even have to try to make them a real person, in fact, it might help to simply imagine someone who offends you to your very core.

That person is the Samaritan woman at the well. That person is who Jesus is talking to here. John goes to great lengths to let us know that fact. Verse 4 says, "But he had to go through Samaria," because honestly no self-respecting Jew wants to go through Samaria, everybody knows about those Samaritans. Jesus is hanging outside of this town at Jacob's well, a place of historical significance that now happens to be in "enemy" territory. The fact that Judeans and Samaritans shared a history was part of the reason they were so much antipathy betwixt the two. To Judeans, Samaritans had been polluted by their involvement with Assyrians, and by that I mean being conquered by them. And like a lot of groups that were the victims of discrimination, Samaritans had no love for Judeans either.

Not only was there the racial/ethnic component of this hatred, there was also a moral problem with this particular woman. She was coming out to draw water at noon. You know when most of the women from town probably came to the well for water? Early morning, because it's cool, because they need it to do lots of the stuff they do back at home, because it is a chance to see your neighbors and catch up on the news and the gossip. This woman comes at noon, alone. She is not acceptable, even to her own people. The reason for this becomes apparent later, but even if Jesus didn't know her particular situation, he would have known that for her to be coming to the well at that hour meant she was carrying some sort of shame.

That doesn't stop him from asking her for a drink of water, from her bucket, with her hand. She herself is stunned by this request. Under normal circumstances he would not have even acknowledged her presence, but here he is asking her to actually give him something that he is going to ingest. Jews and Samaritans don't eat or drink together, but here they are, and guess what: Jesus is drinking her water and beyond that, offering her the "water from the spring of eternal life." Now that's not the kind of offer that a Samaritan (let alone a woman) would really expect from a Jewish Rabbi. Not only is he not despising her the way he's supposed to, even though, as it turns out he knows all about her questionable moral behavior on top of her Samaritan-ness, here he is offering her the life-giving water of salvation.

Right about now the disciples show up. In a flash they go through all the analyses of the scandalous moment they have walked up on, it says they are "astonished," but I suspect that is putting it very mildly. It's about to get worse for them. Jesus is about to tell them that they are going to have to stay for a minute with these Samaritans. They were hoping to just grab some grub and get moving again, like hitting Burger King at the Turnpike rest stop, just get the food and go, but now Jesus wants to stay and set up camp for a few days, in Samaria, and many Samaritans believed.

We're just getting rolling here, but I'm guessing this is not what the Disciples had in mind. They were all Jews, they were all tuned in to the Messiah as the savior who would restore the fortunes of Israel and make it like it was back in the days of David and Solomon. Instead Jesus is making nice with "those

people.” You know the others, the ones you don’t want much to do with. They were looking for one sort of harvest, for the restoration of the temple and Jerusalem, but that is already hitting the rocks. Jesus is here pointing out that maybe they ought to look a little further out. This is important and foundational to the identity of the church: looking further out there for the others. We have lost that vision and we have focused too much on gathering together in groups that make us comfortable with those we find acceptable.

Look at the model of mission here: Jesus doesn’t go looking for someone who fits, he encounters someone who is cast out and he simply relates to her as a human being, through asking for water. His audacity is simply in breaking through all sorts of expectations. His approach is not based in threatening but in offering, not in fear but in love. His lesson to his disciples is: look around you, there are so many people just dying for this water, will you give it to them?

Who do you want to welcome in to your church? People like you? People who give you the feeling that you are a part of the “right” sort of community? How do you do welcoming people who are scandalous to your sense of decorum? How would you do?