

“We Worship What We Know”

John 4:5-30

When we go through the 50 hours of Stephen Ministry training, we focus on improving communication and listening skills. One of the Bible stories we study is today’s gospel text in which Jesus teaches us how to listen and respond. As we look at this story, let’s ask ourselves what we can learn from Jesus about how to do ministry with a person we don’t know and is different than us.

Did Jesus have to go through Samaria? No. There were other routes between Judea and Galilee – the coastal route along the Mediterranean or the Jordan Valley along the Jordan River. Of course, observant Jews at the time of Jesus did not go through Samaria because they did not want to be contaminated by contact with Samaritans. So Jesus didn’t have to go through Samaria to get back to Galilee. Jews chose the other two routes.

Jesus did not choose to go through Samaria because it was the only way or it was on his way, but because Samaria was on his mind. He goes there by necessity, but the necessity is in Him and not in his circumstances.

Jesus knew that his ministry was local, individual, and personal. In John, “the Word became flesh and lived among us”. Samaria is included in the itinerary of the Word Incarnate by design, not by accident.

He had to go to Samaria because he could not win her any other way; not with a card, a text message, or virtual presence on a television screen. In-person contact is the way of this Gospel and the most consequential encounters in John happen one on one.

And so, at high noon, we find Jesus in Samaria.

John 4:5-9 . . . ⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. ⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

To read these five verses takes about 30 seconds. But how long was the actual time in this exchange?

I think it went something like this. Jesus comes to the well first. She comes alone, not expecting anyone to be there. The situation is awkward because she has chosen the time of day when there is the least chance of running into other people. She eyes the stranger warily who is already sitting at the well. Awareness of the other, looking at one another is the first element in the encounter.

She will complete her errand despite the stranger sitting at the well. She is not intimidated by the presence of Jesus or being alone with him.

She lowers the bucket to get her water before anything is said. This takes time because, as she will say moments later, "the well is deep", 125 to 240 feet deep by various estimates. Ten minutes might have transpired before either of them says anything. It's not until she has her pail of water that Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink".

We can assume that Jesus drinks the water she gives him with an expression of gratitude.

Only then, when she has done something for him, and there is a sense of parity in the relationship, does she ask him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”

Jesus has already won her confidence and she feels comfortable enough to ask a question. We need to win a person’s confidence before we can do anything else. Winning a person’s confidence begins with genuine interest in that person. Jesus breaks the ice and is quickly able to overcome prejudice and distrust by asking her for a favor. The church ministries we launch and the classes we teach don’t do much good unless we’ve won the trust of the recipients. If people don’t trust us, we can cause more harm than good.

After 10 or 15 minutes, a Jew talks to a Samaritan, breaking the socio-ethnic barrier. A man talks to a woman, breaching the gender barrier, a pious person talks to a sinful person, breaching the moral or religious barrier.

We know that when we’re talking to someone for the first time or anytime, trust is built less by how well we talk than by how well we listen. We know the woman trusts Jesus when she decides to engage in a conversation that could have been avoided. It’s not hard to imagine her hurrying away from the well without saying a word to the stranger. Instead she stays to talk. Triggered by his simple request and reinforced by her question, the conversation will be one for the ages.

We move from his need to her need, from her water to his water.

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink’, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water,” Jesus says.

She does not quite get the point, but she gets the hint that she has a need and that God has a remedy for it. On the premise of her need and his remedy, she declares, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water”.

At this point the conversation shifts gears when Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back”.

This might seem like a change of subject, but it’s not. What could be better than “living water” to bring an end to the trips to the well at high noon all by herself, as a person ostracized from her community? She doesn’t understand the concept of “living water”, but she feels the appeal of getting water that quenches a person’s thirst to such an extent that one no longer has to make the trip to the well. Jesus is speaking directly to her situation in life.

“I have no husband”, she answers. That could have been the end of the conversation. She could have gotten up and left. As I imagine it, Jesus allows her time to leave and doesn’t continue until he’s certain she won’t leave. He can only say what he will say next when he’s confident of having earned her trust.

“You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband”, he says, adding, “What you have said is true”.

This move is extremely daring but necessary and ultimately liberating. How he says it and how we say things matters more than what he said. Again, a pause on her part is likely now that all is out in the open. What now? “I see that you are a prophet”, she says.

At this point I see her body language as apprehensive and questioning. Jesus’ body language is accepting, reassuring, and she is looking into a non-judgmental face.

She is quickly realizing that Jesus is a great spiritual leader when she asked in verse 12, “Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob who gave us this well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?”

“I see that you are a prophet”, lifts him up even higher. And this progression in her view of him has not run its course. She resumes the conversation, asking for the prophet’s opinion on the dispute between Jews and Samaritans as to the correct place for worship, only to have Jesus answer that neither Jerusalem nor Samaria means anything in the new reality that is breaking into the world.

“I know that Messiah is coming”, she says. “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.”

That would have been a fitting end to the conversation. Remember verse 4, “But he had to go through Samaria”, and now we know why. In John, “the Word became flesh and lived among us”.

Samaria is included in the itinerary of the Word Incarnate by design, not by accident. He had to go to Samaria because he could not win her any other way. In person contact and conversation was necessary for her to begin her ministry of sharing the Good News with others.

Then his disciples come back and want to say it out loud but leave it at the level of thought: “What do you want?” or “Why are you speaking with her?” They find themselves in a place where they’d rather not be and they find Jesus alone with a Samaritan woman who obviously has issues or she wouldn’t be at the well at high noon.

“Why are you speaking with her?” She, nevertheless, will be the first to win Samaria; she, not his disciples and not a man.

For the men in the story, four months remain until harvest in verse 35. For Jesus, by contrast, “the fields are ripe for harvesting”.

The disciple’s lack of interest in Samaria is surpassed only by their lack of respect for her.

“Rabbi, eat something,” the disciples say, thinking of his physical hunger. “I have food to eat that you do not know about,” he answers. They wonder if someone else has brought him food but Jesus speaks of a different kind of food. His deepest need has been met in the encounter with the Samaritan woman. “Jesus had to go through Samaria” and so do we.

May the peace of God . . .

#611 – I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say