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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
3/27/2011, The Third Sunday in Lent  
John 4:5-42

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>27</sup>Just then his disciples came. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but none said, “What do you wish?” or, “Why are you talking with her?” <sup>28</sup>So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people, <sup>29</sup>“Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (John 4:5-42, RSV)

This past Friday, my wife, Carol, and I went to see one of the most fantastic exhibits ever: an exhibition called “Infinite Variety: Three Centuries of Red and White Quilts.” It is at the Park Avenue Armory, between 66th and 67th Streets. It is free, but it will be there for only a few more days, until March 30th. I encourage you to see it. Go this afternoon if you can. Weary New Yorkers were smiling, every one of them, at this Milky Way of quilts -- 650 red and white quilts suspended in the sky, filling the volume of that large armory, from eye level to the rafters. Women, men, children: we were entirely charmed by this display from the moment we passed through those heavy wood doors of the armory and caught sight of those quilts. It was especially fun to see the exhibit with Carol because she knows quilting and could tell me about the stitches and how those quilts were constructed.

There were guides there from the American Folk Art Museum eager to talk about the quilts. One of the guides mentioned something that caught my imagination. She observed that back in the 18th and 19th centuries, when many of those quilts were made, people did not have psychotherapists, nor Prozac. What they had were quilting bees. She enjoyed imagining the women sitting around at the quilting table, carefully stitching, and talking together all the while.

That is how I like to imagine the Samaritan woman in today’s Gospel story. The text says that she told the people of her city about Jesus. She told them about “a man who told me all that I ever did.” Indeed, I bet she did tell them, aye, and not just one time either. I picture her at quilting bees for years to come reminiscing about the first time she met Jesus, the first time she talked with the man, that first day when she became his disciple. Till old age, and then on into eternity, I bet she loved to tell “the old, old story of Jesus and his love.” (LBW 390, “I Love to Tell the Story”)

For she was a talker. That is one of the fun things about this story. The Samaritan woman was verbal. If something was on her mind, it was soon on her tongue. In this she contrasts with some other people in St. John’s Gospel, especially with some of the men. Compared to her, the men seem rather slow of wit and slow of tongue, as, indeed, we often are.

Take the Twelve disciples, for example. Our texts seems to make a point of contrasting the silence of the men with the witness of the woman:

<sup>27</sup>Just then his disciples came. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but *none said*, “What do you wish?” or, “Why are you talking with her?” <sup>28</sup>So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and *said to the people*, <sup>29</sup>“Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (John 4:5-42, RSV)

The Twelve disciples had walked with Jesus for a while now. He had called them by name to follow him. Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus specifies that he thinks of them as his “friends”:

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. (John 15:15, RSV)

You would think that it any one would be free and easy in conversation with Jesus, it would be the Twelve. But no, they are puzzled by something, they are puzzled by Jesus speaking with a Samaritan woman, but they lapse into silence about it.

But not the woman. If she was startled by Jesus speaking to her, she did not let her surprise drive her into silence, nor confusion. She does not seem to take offense, nor to scold Jesus, but calmly talks with her. So, at the start of the scene, Jesus asks her for water. This is an unusual request. It crossed boundaries in those days according to which men and women who were strangers to one another did not talk to one another, and Jews did not talk with Samaritans. So, when Jesus asked her for water, she could have quietly walked away, but she did not. Instead, she stepped right across the old boundaries and flat out asked the question on her mind:

<sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that *you*, a Jew, ask a drink of *me*, a woman of Samaria?” For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

With that question, she advances the conversation.

And when Jesus began to speak of spiritual things, she answers him forthrightly. In this she contrasts with the more quiet Nicodemus, from the preceding chapter, St. John 3. Notice some of the contrasts between these two disciples. Yes, they both prove to be disciples, but of different sorts.

First, Nicodemus comes by night to speak with Jesus. He is a man of privilege, for he was a Pharisee and a “ruler of the Jews”:

<sup>1</sup>Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>This man came to Jesus by night...”(John 3:1-2, RSV)

Perhaps he feared to put his status at risk before other members of the Council. So, he comes to Jesus by night, with a compliment ready on his lips:

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him.” (John 3:2, RSV)

But the conversation with the woman takes place in broad daylight. The text specifies that it was the “sixth hour” when Jesus and the woman talked. That is, it was noon. Anyone walking by could have seen them talking.

She does not begin with a compliment. Jesus begins. But when he begins the conversation, she gives answer, holding nothing back, each time asking the question that is on her mind, as when she says, “Are you talking to me, a Samaritan woman?”

In the story of Nicodemus, he expresses wonder about the words of Jesus. When Jesus compares the Holy Spirit to the wind, blowing where it will, and causing people to born again, Nicodemus admits that he does not follow this:

Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? (John 3:9, KJV)

But then he lapses into silence. We hear no more from him in Chapter Three. At the end of the story, Nicodemus is still a disciple, still loyal to Jesus, but he is silent there too, letting his friend Joseph of Arimathea do the talking:

<sup>38</sup>After this Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him leave. So he came and took away his body. <sup>39</sup>Nicodemus also, who had at first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds' weight. <sup>40</sup>They took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. (John 19:38-40, RSV)

Altogether, Nicodemus might be a “teacher of Israel,” yet he tends toward silence. He speaks very cautiously.

Not so this dear woman of Samaria. Jesus speaks of “a spring of water welling up to eternal life,” she blurts out the obvious response, the human response:

<sup>15</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.” (John 4:15, RSV)

When Jesus asks her to bring her husband to her, she straightforwardly answers, “I have no husband.” And when Jesus corrects her in this matter, she does not depart in a huff, but presses on in the conversation:

Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; <sup>18</sup>for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly.” <sup>19</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup>Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.”

She continues her conversation with Jesus all the way to the most sublime truth:

<sup>25</sup>The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things.” <sup>26</sup>Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.” (John 4:25, RSV)

She has persevered in her conversation until she has taken the measure of the man, until she hears him say, “I am he.” For both Samaritans and Jews, that phrase carries overtones of divinity, going back to Moses asking the identity of God and receiving the answer, “I am who I am”:

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:14, RSV)

All this the woman at the well has accomplished by her conversation -- a Samaritan woman who by the ancient standards ought not to be talking to Jesus at all.

I admire her for her openness and her ability to speak. Some disciples are more quiet, like Nicodemus and the Twelve, at least on this occasion, and those silent ones are dear to Jesus too. He is glad to count them as “friends.” But the words of this woman permitted a great thing to happen in that village. Through her conversation with Jesus and with her talking to others about it afterwards, sitting around the quilting table or wherever she was, she helped lead others to faith in our Saviour.

Now, before we say goodbye to this Samaritan woman at the well, I want to share something with you that I have learned from my wife, Carol. She has meditated on this story much more than I have. She has thought about it for years. As it turns out, a deep pleasure for Carol about the little church she serves there at The Wartburg is that the Chapel windows often feature stories of women and children, including this story of the Samaritan woman at the well. So Carol is preaching on this story today, and she means to preach again on it at the midweek Lent service later this week. Carol loves the Samaritan woman at the well.

Even more, Carol loves the One the woman was speaking with. She loves Jesus. And Carol believes that one day, you and I are going to have an earnest conversation with Jesus, just as the woman at the well did. In fact, Carol tends to think of the great and awful Last Judgment in terms of the woman at the well and her conversation with Jesus. One day, according to Carol’s thinking, you and I are

going to sit down and talk with Someone who knows us thoroughly, up and down, inside and out. And so, one day we will echo the words of the woman at the well:

<sup>29</sup>“Come, see a man who told me *all that I ever did?*” (John 4:29, RSV)

“All that I ever did.” What a saying! I see no way around this, nor do I think we should want to avoid it: One day, we will follow in the steps of the Samaritan woman at the well, and we will have an honest conversation with Jesus. It might take a long time to work our way through such a talk, for much has gone on in your life and in my life. There is going to be much to talk out. But that conversation transformed the woman at the well, and made her into a believer in Christ. It was not a bad outcome. Likewise with us. An important pastoral conversation awaits us. We will come out of it okay, but mercy! If we are going to have such a conversation with Christ who will tell us “all that I ever did,” let us make it our business in the time till then to include some *good things* among all those things we ever did, to the benefit of our neighbors and to the glory of him whose name we bear, even Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.