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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/23/2014, The Third Sunday in Lent
Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:5-42

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²⁸So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people, ²⁹“Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (John 4:28-29, RSV)

One of Carol’s favorite Garrison Keillor lines occurred in a fund-raising event at Gettysburg College back in the days when Carol and I lived in that town. Garrison served on a board for the Gettysburg College literary journal, and so he sometimes came to town for board meetings. This fund raiser for the College journal was fun because it was so much like his Prairie Home Companion shows. He didn’t organize it, but he joined right in with the local blue grass bands and he shared a monologue with us.

He started his monologue by saying that recently he had been doing some writing about cowboys. He said that he liked cowboys and identified with them because, he said, “Cowboys are lonely men, and I’m a lonely man.” Then he added, “I think all men are lonely. And I think all women are lonely too. But they get together and talk about it.”

This salute to the verbal abilities and inclinations of women happens to show itself in our two most recent Gospel stories: last week’s story of Nicodemus and this morning’s story of the woman at the well.¹ Nicodemus was a rabbi, and so he was paid to talk. Still, as we find him in the Gospel story, Nicodemus tends to be a quiet man. That’s all right. Some rabbis and some pastors are that way. They tend to be shy and quiet. But, God willing, they can still be good ministers anyway.

It is not that Nicodemus was entirely silent. It was just that he tended to run out of steam pretty quickly. We encounter Nicodemus three times in Saint John’s Gospel. Each time, he either is silent or makes an initial stab at speaking, but then gives it up.

The first time is last Sunday’s story. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. His conversation did not take place in broad daylight, as does today’s conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, but was a quiet and private conversation with our Lord. Nicodemus starts off with a compliment – “Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God...” – but soon he becomes confused and then

¹ The contrast between the reticence of Nicodemus and the expressiveness of the Samaritan woman at the well is pointed out by Mary Margaret Pazdan, OP, in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels*. Edited by Roger E. Van Harn. (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001), pages 501-505.

silent. He doesn't understand how an old man can be "born again," or "born from above," and when Jesus speaks his golden words about the Son, we hear nary a word of reply from Nicodemus. Imagine, he has nothing to say about the momentous words of Jesus:

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:16-17, KJV)

These sublime words might have found a place in the heart of Nicodemus – I like to think they did — but we hear nothing from him about them.

We find a similar pattern of a beginning burst of speech that soon falls exhausted by the road in the scene where Nicodemus tries to defend Jesus against the plots of his fellow Pharisees. When the man speaks, he says something important:

⁵⁰Nicodemus saith unto them, (he that came to Jesus by night, being one of them,) ⁵¹Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth? (John 7:50-51, KJV)

But his brother Pharisees give him a sharp rebuke:

⁵²They answered and said unto him, Art thou also of Galilee? Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet. (John 7:52, KJV)

And then we hear no more from Nicodemus. The scene simply ends with these quiet words:

⁵³And every man went unto his own house. (John 7:53, KJV)

In the final reference to Nicodemus, the man does not speak at all. He does something brave — he goes with Joseph of Arimathea to fetch the body of Jesus from the cross and place it in the tomb — but Joseph does all the talking. In fact, Nicodemus seems not even to have gone with Joseph to request the body from Pilate.

³⁸And after this Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. ³⁹And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by

night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. ⁴⁰Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. (John 19:38-40, KJV)

Here Nicodemus says not a word. Altogether, Nicodemus seems to have been a quiet man.

SUNNY AND EXPRESSIVE

Not so the Samaritan woman at the well in today's story. Compared to Nicodemus, she is all sunny and expressive.

That Jesus should talk with her was unlikely by the standards of those days. She was a woman and she was a Samaritan. On both accounts, it was extraordinary that Jesus should talk to her. But her theory seemed to be that if Jesus would speak to her, she was going to speak right back to him. And she did, much to her benefit and to benefit of her village.

Indeed, it seems unlikely that she and that town would have found the great Shepherd of the souls if this woman at the well had not been so talkative.

Her background contains sorrow, but it seems not have broken her spirit. She has had five husbands. Maybe that means that she was a widow five times over. Maybe it means that she went through the heartaches of divorce some of those times. Either way, it has not been an easy path for her up to this point. Furthermore, Jesus observes that she is not married, but has someone anyway:

Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly." (John 4:17-18, RSV)

In the days of my youth, this was called "living in sin." For various reasons – often very complicated and hard to sort out – the two are not married. Maybe this is a sorrow to one or to both. Maybe they have simply despaired about marriage and no longer think in terms of marriage. Whatever the reason, Jesus has made an intimate observation about the woman:

...and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly.

Who could have blamed the woman if she had become flustered or defensive or perhaps even offended by Jesus? But she doesn't skip a beat. She goes right on to the spiritually important point: Before her stands Someone who knows her inside and out. She does not get sidetracked into arguing about her past and

present behavior. Rather, she goes to the heart of the matter: She has met Someone extraordinary.

So, she says it:

¹⁹The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.”

Now, in saying that Jesus is a “prophet,” she is acknowledging that God is with Jesus and that Jesus speaks for God — not simply about God, but for God! It is high praise.

And she immediately sees the implications of this for the ancient Samaritan/Jewish conflict. For this extraordinary One standing before her is not a Samaritan, but a Jew. He happens to be a Jew who has special affection for Samaritans. One of his most beloved parables concerned a Samaritan — the Good Samaritan. And when he is resurrected and gives his Great Commission to his disciples, he instructs them to begin preaching the Gospel in Jerusalem and Judea, and then he speaks next of Samaria, leaving out explicit mention of his own homeland, Galilee:

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. (Acts 1:8, KJV)

So, Jesus seems to like Samaritans. Nonetheless, he is a Jew and the woman at the well can immediately see the larger picture and the questions it raises about her Samaritan faith, including the Samaritan conviction that Mount Gerizim² was the proper place to worship God, and not Jerusalem:

²⁰Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship. (John 4:20, RSV)

I am not so much interested now in this dispute concerning Jerusalem, but simply in the happy observation that this woman’s verbal skills and flow of words ends up leading her and her village to Christ:

²⁸So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people, ²⁹“Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (John 4:28-29, RSV)

² There was some logic to this. See Deuteronomy 11:12 and 27:12. Also Joshua 8:33.

And so it is that we come to the magnificent ending to today's Gospel story:

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world." (John 4:39-42, RSV)

Here we have the classic pattern of evangelism. Here we have the pattern of how our church – Immanuel - grows, or any church grows. Someone who has met Jesus goes to others and tells the news. She gives her testimony of what she has learned of Jesus and how Jesus has touched her life. She speaks of what Jesus has meant for her, and how life looks to her now that she has met Jesus. She tells others where he is: He is at the well. Or he is at Immanuel Lutheran Church. And then the neighbors go to him, and he converts them, if they are willing.

My goal in this sermon has not been so much to encourage us to be talkative like this Samaritan woman at the well, but rather to invite us to seek shelter in the same Savior she and her town found. People simply vary in their verbal skills and gregariousness. I figure that a Christian congregation can well include both the reserved, even faltering, words of Nicodemus as well as the bright words of the Samaritan woman at the well.

Some folks probably could afford to talk more. They could afford to put some thought into speaking some more, make a plan if need be to discuss things some more, jot down notes: "Oh, yes, I mean to discuss this with my wife when she gets home, with my husband when he gets home." That sounds good.

But the truly good point is that the Samaritan woman at the well was talking with Someone who calmly talked with her, and then continued his Lenten journey to the Cross. He continued that journey for her. He continued that journey for us. And to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.