

## EVERYBODY IS A SOMEBODY TO CHRIST

Lent 3 John 4:5-42

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There is rarely two weeks in a row where the characters and the story involved in the gospel present the stark and dramatic contrast that we have between Nicodemus from last week and the Samaritan woman at the well this week.

Last week the wise, respected and apparently well-known Pharisee Nicodemus doesn't get it, but this week the common, despised, uneducated Samaritan woman does. The difference between the people who are the main characters between this week and last could not be greater!

Everything about this story is shocking. We do not understand the impact of his traveling through Samaria, speaking to a Samaritan and then a woman on top of it. This was the most direct route between the two places that Jesus was traveling between. The gospel said he had to go through Samaria. This implies that there was more than just convenience in the selection of his route and very probably it was to make the point of this story.

There is a challenge in trying to describe how shocking this would have been to a Jewish audience of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The story behind the Samaritans is challenging and sometimes contradictory. That Samaritans, and by this we mean something other than just people who lived in the region of Samaria, were disliked by the Jews is very clear and John shows Jesus using them several times in his gospel. One source of information about them is in 2 Kings 17:24-34.

This passage tells us that they are descendants of people brought in from other lands to populate the area after most of the Jews were taken to Babylon when Jerusalem was conquered and the Babylonians destroyed the first temple. They brought their own gods and worship into the land of YHWH. The story goes that there were various disasters and this was blamed on the fact that these immigrants did not pay homage to YHWH the God of this land. So priests were sent and the Samaritans were told to worship YHWH. Some if not most were not true monotheists especially back in this post exile period. They believed in YHWH, but not necessarily that YHWH was the only God. Samaritans did not feel that they had to go to Jerusalem since their temples and worship sites were legitimate. Now there is research that disputes this, but you can imagine that if anything like this is true, they would be held in very poor regard and considered pagans by the Jews of the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

With that information as background you can see that it is truly incredible that this outsider believes without any problem or reservation once she understands. The woman is often thought to be a sinner, but a.) this isn't supported by the writing and b.) it doesn't matter to Jesus. There is nothing that says she is immoral because of having had all those

husbands. Maybe this was a string of levitical marriages where she kept getting married off to the various male relatives after her first husband died. Of greater importance is that her moral standard is not what is important. Sin in this case is unbelief and she responds to Jesus by believing. She is in fact so excited once she finally understands, that rather than run into the shadows like Nicodemus, she runs to the village and asks the whole village to come and see.

Richard Rohr writes: "Enlightenment is not about knowing as much as it is about unknowing; it is not so much learning as unlearning. It is about surrendering and letting go rather than achieving and possessing. It's more about entering the mystery than arriving at a mental certitude." Nicodemus will not go there, but our unnamed Samaritan woman does!<sup>1</sup>

Now if all of this is not shocking enough Jesus then spends several days with a large group of Samaritans, welcoming their signs of faith. This is one of the first large groups of converts in John's gospel and they are from a despised group. In fact this is the first time in John's gospel that Jesus uses the famous ego emi, I am statement. Our translation says I am he, but in the Greek it is simply I am, echoing God's words to Moses when Moses asks who are you to the burning bush. This I am statement is made to a woman from an outcast group who goes and brings her whole village out and they all are converted.

The Rev. Lane Denison wrote in his Out of Nowhere email this week: "In one stroke, the rigid sanctions of the kind of worship and religion and custom that she and her people have embraced for centuries are abolished. Jesus proposes a revolutionary new liturgy based not on the usual male-dominated, retrogressive system of exclusion and judgment, but a Way grounded unpretentiously and candidly in spirit and in truth."

The action is the result of this epiphany. The response is to invite others to come and see. This show of total belief is the overcoming of the sin of non-belief. This come and see is how a whole community is changed. We change our community when we invite people to come and see, but we do a terrible job of this in the Episcopal Church as a whole. We at St. Aidan's have a chance to change that in the next two weeks.

Our Stop Hunger Now food packing event is an opportunity to invite others to come and see. This is far more important than providing food for 10,000, which in an of itself is an important task. That however is just the groundwork. I have invited others to come and see including our Boy Scout troop, the Seton youth and Wendy is bringing her Canterbury students from Christopher Newport University and they are donating some of their funds to help with the cost. Now it is your turn. What a unique opportunity to bring someone who doesn't know about our parish. This is more than just a church service. Think what this place would look like if each one of us invited just one other person. So that is challenge number one for all of you over the next two weeks. People are looking for a church that is more than just talk, but one of action.

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<sup>1</sup> Rohr, Richard: On the Threshold of Transformation (Loyola Press, Chicago 2010) pf. 38

There is however another challenge that I want all of us to pray about for a few moments, maybe a few weeks this lent.

One of my struggles in explaining the magnitude of this action by Jesus in speaking with Samaritans is to come up with a modern day equivalent. The Jews treated Samaritans as nobodies, like they didn't even exist. There is a challenge here in that the nobodies of today are different depending on your social, ethnic or economic group.

So who are the nobodies in our midst? Those people whom society as a whole treat as invisible, the ones we do not wish to see and certainly would not sit down and speak to let alone eat with or invite into our church.

Look at our last two Baptismal promises and ask yourself who is outside of Jesus' loving embrace?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

I put the emphasis on the word all and every. There is precious little wiggle room here. Jesus opens his arms on the cross and welcomes all in. For Jesus there are no unimportant people. For Jesus there is no surplus population as Scrooge says in the Christmas Carol. Everybody is a somebody to Christ.

So who are the somebodies that our society considers the nobodies? Who are the nobodies that are somebodies that we in this congregation are called to minister to right here in Virginia Beach? Take a moment and turn to a person near you and share the first thought that popped into your mind. (allow time for report back)

Now I will give you a few moments to consider this and then write those down and place them in the alms basin when we take the collection. I will give those to Lynn Meadows our Outreach person and she will see what we can do to set priorities for our ministry in the future.