

I have to begin this sermon with a lament. Frequently this text has been used to pass some moral judgment on women and their marital status. This judgment usually comes from men in the role of pastors who should know better. We have one of the most important encounters Jesus has in the Gospel of John, that shows how amazing God's mission is. Rather than focusing on that we seem to get hung up on further victimizing a woman who does not have much agency to begin with. If the church could get beyond our hang ups judging this woman we could have a much better understanding of who God is and who we are called to be.

Jesus just finished talking to Nicodemus, the pharisee who came to him at night. In that discussion Jesus let on just how much God so loved the world, enough to give his only son. After this conversation Jesus finds out that the other Pharisees are not happy with his growing popularity so he has to get out of town. He decides to leave Jerusalem and go back to Galilee where he started his ministry.

From a geographical point of view there is no reason that a trip from Jerusalem to Galilee would take you through Samaria. Not only is it out of the way, but this is hostile territory. These two people are enemies. Culturally it was totally acceptable to assume they hated one another. Still the narrator tells us that Jesus had to go this way. So that is the way that they go.

Jesus and the disciples approach Jacob's well and they are tired, hungry, thirsty, and hot. It is the middle of the day in the desert. This is the well where Jacob, Isaac's son and Abraham's grandson, meet his wife. His dad also met his wife at a well. This was apparently the place to meet people back in the day. Everyone involved in today's text would know this.

Jesus goes up to this well, that has cultural significance. Here he encounters a woman. This is starting to sound like an engagement story. But we find out that this woman has every reason to be suspicious of marriage. The way that marriage was structured at that time took care to ensure that widows were looked after, but that in turn led them to be seen as burdens to the subsequent "husbands" who were typically male relation to their initial husband. She has been through this traumatic experience several times.

She comes to the well at noon, not because it is the best time of the day to get water but because she doesn't want to deal with the stigma of the community who goes before the sun has risen. She doesn't want to deal with rumors, superstitions, or whatever else has been thrown at her in the past. She comes at a time when she can be left alone.

It is then that Jesus treats her as a peer, asking her to get him some water. Every imaginable taboo is being crossed here. This is the love for the world that God has. This is the image that we get to see the expansiveness of God's love. Jesus sitting with someone considered to be an enemy, crossing lines of class, gender, culture and more.

Throughout scripture we are invited to pray for our enemies and those who would wish us harm. In seminary I discovered that when pastors in training want to tell someone to take a long walk off a short pier, or whatever profanity you want to fill into that sentiment, it would often come out

of their mouths as “I’ll pray for you.” I take this command in scripture seriously which resulted in telling people exactly where and how they should go when I felt the conversation required such instruction. The command that we pray for our enemies is not an invitation to passive aggressive platitudes. Here Jesus shows dignity and humanity to an enemy. He does this in such a way that the imagery in this encounter feels like an engagement story. That is the level of God’s love for the world. That is how much God is craving to be in relationship with humanity. That is the care and love we are invited to share with our community.

That is not to say that you should go out and marry someone who hates you. Rather, when we approach people, we should do so guided by Jesus who is breaking every conceivable wall to be in a relationship with and see the humanity of this person.

This woman is reconciled unto God. She sees that Jesus is the Messiah. Through that she, an outcast, goes back to the city where she is reconciled to her community. She is restored in her community and in her relationship with others, turning from being an outcast to being the one who bears the good news of God.

God is seeking to be in relationship with humanity. The word becomes flesh and walks among us. As we are reconciled unto God we are invited to go and be in deeper relationships with our neighbors even if that crosses taboos. We are freed to see all people with dignity, hospitality, and love. That is the good news. Amen.