

## **“Jesus Has a Way of Changing the Story”**

**John 4:5-42**

**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**

**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**

**March 12, 2023**

The story we have read from John 4 is what biblical scholars call a betrothal type-scene. It's like jokes that begin with, “Three men went into a bar.” There are many forms of the joke where the men may be different religious leaders or fans of different teams, but we know the basic pattern of the story and generally where it will go. Jesus meeting a woman at a well matches a similar pattern in ancient Jewish storytelling.

To begin with, people often meet at a well, as men go into bars. This part of the story makes sense. Then, in Genesis 24, Abraham's servant finds Isaac's wife, Rebekah, at a well. In Genesis 29, Jacob meets his future wife, Rachel, at a well. So, the stage is set. Jesus meets a woman at a well. An informed reader knows how the story will go.

But an informed reader also knows that Jesus has a way of turning stories upside down. He does not color within the lines. This story is no exception. There will be talk of marriage, but the narrative gets there in a strange way, and marriage — the woman's multiple marriages, to be precise — is not the focus of the story. Jesus changes the plot and the reality for each individual in the story. He has a way of doing this. In fact, he even does it with his own story, but the point is Jesus has a way of changing the story for all involved.

This story begins with Jesus meeting a woman at a well in Sychar, which is most likely a Hebrew slur of Shechem, the former capital of the Northern Kingdom. Sychar means drunken or deceitful. It is not what Samaritans call the city. But it is still clear that Jesus is in Samaritan territory, John tells us this. So, the woman is most likely a Samaritan, someone Jesus is strictly forbidden to speak with by tradition.

It's bad enough that she is an unknown woman who might bring her own scandalous details of life, rendering her inappropriate to interact with for any faithful Jewish man, much less a rabbi. But that she is a

Samaritan makes it even more inappropriate. There is a long history here, involving different worship sites and other matters, but that Jewish high priest John Hyrcanus destroyed Shechem and razed the Samaritans' temple on Mount Gerazim in 128 BCE tells us all we need to know.

Yet Jesus, always coloring outside the lines, speaks to the woman, telling her to give him water. Predictably, she points out how inappropriate it is for him to talk to her. "You're asking me for help?" she says, "A Jewish man asking a Samaritan woman?" "If you knew who I am," he says, "You would ask me for living water." And from there, through many twists and turns — we might say leaps and bounds, given how much theological ground this conversation covers — Jesus ends up telling her that he is the Messiah both Jews and Samaritans have been waiting for, the source of living water that gushes up to eternal life.

The point at which the woman begins to believe that there is something special about Jesus is when he says she has had five husbands and the man she is with now is not her husband. The church has tended to focus on these details, assuming they mean she is some kind of wayward woman, and she does come to the well at midday, an unusual time. Most come early in the morning when it is not so hot. Perhaps she is avoiding others who might look down on her.

But two plus two does not equal twenty-four. She may well be ostracized, but that doesn't mean she deserves to be. The text does not say what happened to those five husbands. They may all have died, and not at her hands. The marriages may have ended in divorce, but only a man could initiate divorce and for something as miniscule as a bad meal.

We don't know anything about this woman other than that she has been through a lot and probably has been living as an outcast. Yet Jesus still talks with her. Indeed, this is the longest conversation he has with anyone in the Gospels. He is coloring outside the lines! He talks with this woman, offering welcome and acceptance. And he talks in ways that transcend the age-old tensions between Jews and Samaritans, saying both expect a Messiah, he is that Messiah, and the day is coming when all true believers will worship God in spirit and in truth.

At this point, the disciples come back and are astonished that Jesus is talking to this woman, but they have enough sense, for once, not to

question Jesus about it. The woman rushes back to the city to tell people all about Jesus, wondering, “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” The Samaritans are intrigued. Many believe immediately while others must see for themselves, but in the end, they believe, just like the woman who is quite an evangelist, saying Jesus is the Savior of the world!

So, Jesus changes the story in this betrothal type-scene. He doesn’t marry anyone but rather connects two people groups — Jews and Samaritans. He also changes the woman’s story. She is going to be viewed differently now. She is going to be welcomed into community. She experiences eternal life, which is not just life everlasting but a different quality of life now. And Jesus changes the story for many other Samaritans who come to believe in him. So, this may not be a matchmaker story, but it is a story of redemption, inclusion, and reconciliation. Jesus changes the story and everyone involved benefits.

What might this say to us? At the very least, it points to the reality that Jesus can change our story. For most of us, he already has. I didn’t come from a bad family. It had its dysfunctions, like most families, but I was cared for and loved. I just didn’t have any stability or direction. My encounter with Christ as a teenager in a thoughtful Baptist youth group changed my story — what I believe, how I live, my vocation, who I am. Jesus changed all this like a spring of water gushing up to a full life.

Your experience may not have been exactly like mine, but Jesus has changed your story in some way, has he not? You could have had different values, you might have been more self-centered, you could have followed the patterns of Southern culture in separating the world into categories of “us” and “them” and continued habits of prejudice and discrimination. But meeting Jesus and hearing his teachings over and over again has a way of penetrating even the strongest barriers of resistance to change. If we have met Jesus, he has changed our story.

And he continues to do so. As Paul Baxley asserted last week, we are born from above anew not just once but again and again. Perhaps we move from desolation after loss to the ability to invest in life again. Perhaps we leave the emotional residue of failure and disappointment

behind and claim the nobility we still have within us. Perhaps we get out of the plough mud of stagnation and find a new sense of purpose at work, in relationships, with our faith. In all these ways and more, Jesus changes our story, as he does the Samaritan woman's.

But if we are to take the narrative of John 4 seriously, Jesus also changes our story as a community. There are no longer categories of "us" and "them," like Jews and Samaritans. Our common humanity ought to unite us, but if it does not, the transcendent reality of knowing Christ does. This is indisputable, even if it is ever a work-in-progress.

Dana's mother was concerned when she was young because she said her teacher was different. Knowing the teacher was African-American, her mother was concerned that race was the issue, and she had tried to teach Dana to embrace all people, regardless of their race. But young Dana clarified things. "Yes, she is different," she said, "I think she's a Yankee." Well, there have to be some limits on inclusion!

Kidding aside, we get past some categories of distinction, but there are always other categories. Often in the church, we pray for people we know and love. I certainly do. We name their noble needs of well-lived life — illness, grief, etc. Then, we pray for "others," an entirely different category, those who struggle with addiction and mental illness, those who live with poverty and violence, those who have had real struggle and sin in "their" lives. We pray for "them," "we" who have it all together pray for "them." It's like what many readers do to *the woman at the well*. We pray, perhaps unknowingly, with condescension.

But in God's eyes, there are not different categories of people. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and all are offered mercy and love. All struggle with brokenness and sorrow, and all are offered healing and peace. There is no "us" and "them." Jesus has changed the story of how we relate to each other, how we do community. We are now the people represented by our art banner, hands made by the same Creator, all reaching out for love and community.

Jesus changes our story, as he does the Samaritan woman's and those of many other Samaritans, and he changes his own story. With the benefit of hindsight, we wonder why his disciples didn't recognize who he was, that he would die on a cross. But this was not the traditional understanding of Messiah. How that story went was that God's anointed one would free God's people from oppression, this world oppression.

There was another story, one about a suffering servant who would lay down his life for others. But that was not the story of the Messiah... until Jesus changed the script. He changed even his own path, colored outside the lines of what everyone expected, and died on a cross. And, as with his other script changes, we all benefit.