

IN THE SPIRIT OF WATER

John 4.5-24 (25-42)

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“God is Spirit and those who worship God must do so in spirit and in truth.” (John 4.24)

Truth. Now there’s a concept. We live in a world of blatant lies and political spin and “alternative facts” and charges of “fake news.” And I find myself this morning asking the question Pontius Pilate asked Jesus at the end of the gospel of John: “So what *is* truth?”

After witnessing the alternative facts at work in his own time, Pilate throws up his hands. And then he tries to wash them of any responsibility for the corruption and violence that is taking place all around him.

God help us this morning.

If it’s true that those who worship God must do so in spirit and in truth, I hope you didn’t come to worship this morning thinking that this might be a lovely little distraction from the truth. Jesus is pretty clear. To worship God is to do so in spirit and in truth.

John portrays Pilate the way he does at the end of his story because, all along, John seems to be fixated on truth.

John is the one who says: “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” The purpose of truth is not to collect and to control all the facts. It is to set us free.

John is the one who begins his story of Jesus: “The Word became flesh and lived for awhile among us and we beheld its glory, full of grace and *truth.*”

And the glory of that truth is that it reveals something that might otherwise have been hidden from us. It is not the same thing as something we think we know.

Jesus says to the Samaritan woman at the well: Look, you worship what you do *not* know and we worship what we *do* know but that's not really the point because God is spirit and those who worship God must do so, not based on what they think they know or don't know, but based on spirit and on *truth*.

I have been reading John Caputo, a philosophy professor who teaches at Syracuse. He has written a book about how we have come to understand truth in this present time. Truth, he says, is dynamic. It is always in transit, always in motion, always moving. It's never fixed because there is always more that is being revealed.

For example, have you ever been wrong about someone? You think you know a person and then you discover something that makes you wonder if you ever really knew that person at all?

Of course you do know them, but truth is *more* than just the facts you think you know in any given moment. That's because truth is a spirit that challenges us where we are closed and keeps us open to that which is unfolding.

That's how we get scientific discoveries and medical breakthroughs and spiritual growth. It's why the old non-conformist preacher, John Robinson, said way back in 1620: "I am very confident the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of God's holy Word."

Truth is more than the facts we think we know at any given moment. It is a spirit that challenges us where we are closed and keeps us open to that which is unfolding.

And that's where we find Jesus and the Samaritan woman in the story this morning. The facts are that Jesus is a Jewish man and the Samaritan is a woman and there is no reason to expect that these two would have anything to do with each other.

You may have noticed that the story begins, "Now Jesus *had* to go through Samaria." It sounds like he didn't want to go there but there he was. And perhaps he wouldn't have said anything to the Samaritan woman except that the disciples had gone into town to buy food and he was thirsty.

This scene always reminds me of those old photographs of drinking fountains during the days of Jim Crow – drinking fountains with signs that read "whites only" or "colored only."

Gail O'Day says that while it would have been a shock for Jesus to talk to a Samaritan woman, it would have been a scandal for him to drink out of her cup. That didn't happen.

But the truth is, Jesus was thirsty.

I've been thinking about the story this week in terms of the truths that water might have tell us.

The obvious fact is that everybody gets thirsty. Everybody needs water. It doesn't matter if you are white or black or brown or Jewish or Samaritan or man or woman or child. It doesn't matter how rich you are or how poor. It doesn't matter if you are a good person or bad one. All of us need water. And the Earth needs water if anything is to grow.

So it seems like this one obvious basic fact should connect us.

But it doesn't. The truth is, it can divide us. That's why we have a story that is meant to surprise us about Jesus asking a Samaritan woman for a drink or why there could be "white only" and "colored only" drinking

fountains or how there could be 663 million people right now without access to clean, safe water or why it is that a couple years ago *Newsweek* ran a story that predicted the next world war would not be over oil; it will be, they say, over water.

In November, when we were in Israel and Palestine we saw firsthand the struggle that is going on there right now. Whatever the political and cultural reasons that peace seems so illusive, access to water is one of the primary ones.

The truth is, water reveals to us that the very basic things that should connect us as human beings can become not only a battleground but a weapon.

In the story, every time Jesus wants to wax eloquent about water as a metaphor for something else, the Samaritan woman, rightly, keeps pushing back: Talk all you want to, Jesus, about “living water” but the truth is, you are thirsty, you have no bucket and this well is deep – or do you think you are greater than our ancestors who gave us this well? Because, if you have some kind of water that can keep me from ever being thirsty again, give it to me and I won’t have to keep coming back here to draw water.

It is fascinating at this point that Jesus abruptly changes the subject: “Go get your husband and come back,” Jesus says.

Now this is odd. Is Jesus frustrated with the Samaritan woman and he hopes to do better with the man of the house? Does he ask this question to shame her since he apparently – somehow – surmises her situation? Is he trying to get at some truth that goes deeper?

“I have no husband,” the woman responds and Jesus says: “The truth is, you have had five husbands and the one you are living with now is not your husband.”

Now here, readers sometimes jump in with assumptions. But Gail O'Day and other Bible scholars say not so fast. There is nothing here to indicate moral failure. And, in fact, it is more likely, given the culture, that this poor woman has been married off five times and has had to live through the deaths of each one of her husbands. Whoever it is that she is living with now is not her husband but that only means she no longer has the status of being someone's wife.

Jesus does not condemn her. He does not forgive her for anything. He simply says: "What you say is true."

And this is when the conversation moves to a deeper spiritual level about knowing and not knowing and a vision for a day that is coming – and has already arrived – when people will not worship on this mountain or in that Temple. Because God is spirit seeking those who worship in spirit and in truth.

Now there is something about this interaction that moves this woman. Maybe it is that someone has finally affirmed the truth about her life. Maybe the truth has finally set her free from the tyranny of secrets and whispers and lies. Maybe it's just that someone believed that she was more than the facts of her life.

Whatever it was, the woman "left her water-jar" and ran back to town. And she tells the townspeople: "Could it be that I have met Messiah – the Promised One the Giver of Hope because he saw truth in me?"

And she brings the whole town back with her.

And then something really miraculous happens. The text says that Jesus "stayed with them." Jesus was only passing through. Jesus *had* to go through Samaria. Jews and Samaritans don't have anything to do with each other. But something about the interaction with this woman changes Jesus and he stays with them.

The truth that water has to tell is that a new kind of community is possible.

Look, the fact is that there is a lot that can keep us apart. Some of it is what we think we know about each other. Some of it is just being closed off to people we don't know. Even the most basic things that should connect us with each other and with the planet can be used as a weapon.

There used to be a TV show where one of the characters was always saying, "Just the facts, mam; just the facts."

But today we cannot settle for just the facts – alternative or otherwise.

What we need is truth. And truth is more than the facts we think we know at any given moment. Truth is dynamic. It sets us free. It is always moving in the direction of the potential for a new kind of community. It's a spirit that challenges us where we are closed and keeps us open to that which is unfolding.

God is spirit and those who worship God do so in spirit and in truth.

So, here we are in worship. Where is that spirit working in you?

NOTES

The text for today is sung as the anthem from W.S. Bennett's *The Woman of Samaria* arranged by Vicky Thomas. John Caputo's book is *Truth* (Penguin Books, 2013). The words by John Robinson can be found at www.britannica.com. Gail R. O'Day writes the commentary on the gospel of John in the *Women's bible Commentary*, ed. Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe (Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), pp.383-385. The UN has reported that 663 million people are without safe water and the *Newsweek* article can be found online at www.newsweek.com/2015/05/01world-will-soon-be-war-over-water.