

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who is the Savior of the World, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

This story of the woman at the well is a story that is ironic in its very nature. According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, the term irony means the use of words that mean the opposite of what you really think especially in order to be funny; or a situation that is strange or funny because things happen in a way that seem to be the opposite of what you expected. Now, I'm not suggesting that John uses this story of the unnamed woman at the well to make us laugh, but it's ironic all the same. If you want to get to the bottom of what John wants to tell us about Jesus you have to understand this story in its proper context within John's Gospel.

To do that, let's compare this encounter with Jesus to the one Mark talked about last week where a Jewish teacher named Nicodemus came to visit Jesus at night. First off Nicodemus was a man with a name. In today's Gospel we have a woman with no name. Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. Jesus is the one who made first contact with our unnamed woman and it's high noon, the brightest part of the day. In John's Gospel darkness is always associated with evil, while light is always good. Jesus famously said, "I am the light of the world." Nicodemus came to Jesus and immediately told Him, "We know you are a teacher who comes from God." Our woman at the well knows nothing about this person at the well other

than He is a Jewish man and by all of their cultural and societal norms, He should not be talking to her at all.

Despite all the differences in these two stories, they do have some commonalities. In both encounters with Jesus, Nicodemus and the woman initially misunderstand what Jesus is saying to them. Nicodemus fails to grasp how he is to be born again after he is grown and old. Our woman at the well initially can't understand why the Jewish man would even speak to her, a Samaritan and a woman. There are so many barriers and cultural boundaries separating them. In most of my lifetime of reading and studying the Bible that is the issue most preachers focus on. I'm sure you've heard it too. The moral of the story is that we should be more like Jesus (which is most certainly true) and accept people who are different from us. They will tell you to just look at what Jesus did. He crossed the social boundary of gender just to speak to this woman. Then consider their religious differences. Samaritans were considered blasphemers who perverted the pure worship of The Lord God by intermarrying with people from other religions who worshipped other gods. No good Jew would ever talk to a Samaritan, man or woman. Yet Jesus wipes aside all these boundaries and accepts this harlot of a woman. He forgives her sins and brings her the Gospel and His Living Water.

As I examine this interpretation, I'm troubled by a few assumptions. First, just because she has had five husbands and the man she currently lives with is not

her husband doesn't necessarily make her a prostitute or a sinner. Her former husbands may have all died or divorced her for someone better. That makes her story tragic, not necessarily sinful. Secondly, Jesus never tells her to repent from her sinful ways. Instead He lets her know he is aware of her past and all she has been through. Sometimes when bad things happen to us we assume it's our fault and blame ourselves for things that were well beyond our control. Jesus takes notice of her situation and offers her the gift of God, spiritual water to fill the well of her soul. Both Nicodemus and the woman believe Jesus needs something only they can provide, while failing to see they are the ones in need of what only Jesus can give. The woman thinks Jesus needs the water from the well and only she has the bucket to fetch it. The reality is that Jesus is the one with the true living water that gushes up to eternal life and that is precisely why he has come into the world.

Even the disciples are caught up in the irony of it all. When they encourage Jesus to eat, He tells them he has other food. They assume someone must have brought him a fish sandwich or something, but Jesus was talking about something else. Just like the woman at the well, the disciples don't begin to understand what Jesus is talking about until they go out and start witnessing to others saying, "Come and See." Just as the Samaritan woman did not begin to understand until she became a witness to Jesus, so the disciples will not begin to understand that Jesus is the bread of life until they too invite others to "come and see"

There are so many differences between Nicodemus and our woman at the well. He is educated, Jesus calls him a teacher of Israel. She is a nobody who doesn't even merit a name. She has a past that she is clearly ashamed of while Nicodemus is a respected Pharisee. She meets Jesus in the light of day, while he comes to Jesus under cover of darkness. It almost seems as if John is using this woman as the foil to Nicodemus to make the story of Jesus all the more ironic. While I won't go so far as to say this woman has a sinful past, anymore than any of the rest of us, I will grant she is ashamed of her past. Her shame further separates her from the rest of society. She is in self-imposed exile. She is a nobody whether you believe that's because she has committed great Sin by having so many husbands and now in an extramarital relationship or is she is simply self-segregating herself to avoid further shame and ridicule. The result is the same. She is a nobody.

Isn't that precisely the ones to whom Jesus comes? The nobodies. Jesus brings her the best news of all. Woman, you might be a nobody in the eyes of this world, but not to me. Jesus says, I see your past and all you've done and I still choose to meet you and talk with you and to bless you. With Jesus you can be who you are with all your wonderful talents and characteristics and with all your faults and sin. When Jesus see you, He already knows you, all of you and in knowing you , Jesus loves you.

As wonderful as that news is to all of us nobodies out there, that's still not the moral of this story. The moral of this story is found in the last two verses of this chapter. After the whole conversation about her husband, the woman realizes Jesus is a prophet, one who speaks for God, she leaves her worldly duties behind by leaving her water jug at the well and she runs back to her family and neighbors to tell them about this wonderful prophet who told her everything. Then at the end of the story John tells us that the friends and neighbors who came to see Jesus believed He was the Savior of the World. In other words, because of this unnamed nobody her village came to a saving faith in Jesus as their Savior and indeed the Savior of the whole World.

This story is a perfect illustration of how salvation works. First, Jesus comes and opens up a relationship with you. Then you realize who Jesus is and in your joy you spread that news to your friends and neighbors. I'm sure people can come to know Jesus in many different ways. This isn't the only path to salvation, but this gives us a pretty good insight into the way it all comes together. An incredulous Samaritan woman becomes a witness to the Gospel, Jesus' questioning disciples, i.e. The Church, become co-workers in the harvest, and the despised Samaritans get to spend 2 whole days with the "Savior of the World." More than anything else, this is a story of promise, of expectations overturned, and surpassed. This is a story that is meant to draw us all into participation. It's an invitation to

discover who Jesus is for yourself. The final words help us understand John's purpose for retelling this story. The Samaritan villagers no longer need the woman's witness. They have seen for themselves who Jesus is and they have concluded He is not only the Savior of the World, but also their savior as well.

My question for you this morning is simple. Have you encountered the living Jesus? Are you more like Nicodemus who is ashamed to admit in the light of day that you are a follower of Christ? He never admitted to his fellow Pharisees that he believed in Jesus, but continued to follow in darkness. The Bible never tells us of a single person who came to faith in Christ because of this highly respected teacher of Israel. On the other hand, we see this nameless nobody who brings all her friends and neighbors to faith. How ironic is that?

May we, who gather here today, encounter the living Christ who reveals all those parts of our lives we would rather remain hidden and accepts us as we are. May we be known by Jesus and in the knowing be loved by Him. May our witness bring others to "come and see." May we be known as the church that brings people to the living waters that gush up to eternal life for all people. Amen.