

Lent 3A. March 19, 2017. John 4:5-42.

Such a long and rich story of course has many sermons buried within it, and so to make sure that all of our bases are covered, I plan to preach four sermons this morning. Just kidding. If you don't mind, I would like to zero in on two aspects of discipleship that this story of the Samaritan woman exemplifies for us: honesty and courage. We too often think that a word as weighted as "discipleship" must carry with it a requirement of super saintliness, of having the answers, of special mystical powers. As if to enact that role we must already be members of a spiritual all-star team. This sainted woman shows that this is not the case. A certain kind of honesty and a courage that grows out of vulnerability can be the foundation on which discipleship and extremely effective evangelism can be built.

This unnamed woman's honesty shows itself primarily in her willingness to abide with questions. She doesn't pretend to understand what she doesn't understand. Jesus is talking about living water that slakes our thirst forever and gushes up into eternal life and she's like, "That sounds great, but we're going to need a bucket." Almost everything she says in this story either is a question or implies a question: why are you crossing several social barriers to speak to me? Where do you get the living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob? What about the disagreements between our peoples, Samaritans and Jews, on where proper worship happens? Do you have anything to say about the Messiah? And then finally to her fellow townsfolk, could this guy be the Messiah? These are penetrating questions, that move from social awkwardness and practical puzzling to wandering in mystery, exploring longstanding social divisions, and openness to having her life turned upside down.

It takes a certain kind of honesty to abide with questions. It is much easier to settle on an answer, whether it's correct or not, to pick a viewpoint and stick to it. Persistent questioning reveals that we don't know everything, which in turn, opens up the possibility that we aren't as smart as we'd like people to think we are. Or even that some of our commitments might be wrong. In today's political climate, we have a suspicion that questions reveal weakness, that we don't have time for anything less than a sometimes shrill certainty. We are giving more attention to demands than we are to questions. Now, I'm not objecting to defending those things on which we are sure, but only insisting that in some areas, questions are often the most honest response available to us, and that this kind of honesty can paradoxically be the basis of a deeper, surer relationship with God.

The truth is, there's a lot that we don't fully understand, a lot about which we still have a lot of questions. And I'm talking even about those things on which we base our lives, like how we can be Christians in today's world, how to sort out our multiple commitments and loyalties, how best to love the people in our lives and what on earth it actually looks like to love God. When we allow ourselves to live with these questions,

even to act from these questions, instead of forcing a hasty answer that makes us more comfortable, we make ourselves very vulnerable.

Because here's the thing about a faith that honestly lives on questions: eventually the questions will get turned round to us. When Jesus commands this soon-to-be disciple to go get her husband, her response is factually accurate, but artfully dodges what really matters in the situation. She doesn't lie, but her answer doesn't get at the deeper truth of her situation. It is the kind of answer that I'm suggesting we not settle for in our spiritual lives. And Jesus doesn't settle for it, but pushes the conversation into a deeper truth about her own life. When we pursue it rigorously enough, honest questioning ends up cutting both ways. This is kind of my personal theme for this Lent: learning, with the help of friends and God, to find and speak the truth about ourselves. The Samaritan woman isn't incredibly forthcoming, but when they come to the truth about her life—that her marriage history has been traumatic and that her current relationship gives her a complicated status in the society—she doesn't bail on the conversation. She stays present. And as a result, her life is changed.

There aren't that many examples in the New Testament of more effective evangelism than this lady. She brings a whole city out to see Jesus and many of them become followers of him as a result. And it would have been a hard sell, because in believing in a Jewish rabbi, these Samaritan folks were transgressing some pretty serious ethnic boundaries. And I love her testimony: "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" This is where her courage and her honesty merge. This amazing act of evangelism doesn't rely on any certainty that she doesn't have. It ends, still, with a question. It invites everyone she knows into her questions, where they meet the God who changes their lives.

It takes courage to live from questions, to set off comfortable answers, to allow these questions to be directed at ourselves, and especially to invite other people into these questions. We have to be willing to make ourselves vulnerable, to take risks, to admit that we aren't perfect. We can have our lives changed by God without having all the answers. And then if we have the courage to engage in evangelism, it isn't about telling people the answers to their questions or ours, but simply about inviting them to "come and see."