

March 27, 2011 - Third Sunday of Lent (A)  
Readings for the Third Sunday of Lent (Cycle A):

1. Exodus 17.3-7  
Psalm 95.1-2, 6-7, 8-9 Response: "If today you hear [God's] voice, harden not your hearts."
2. Romans 5.1-2, 5-8
3. John 4.5-42 (Short form: John 4:5-15, 19b-26; 39a, 40-42)

### **Reflections on the Sunday Gospel Reading**

by Bill Hunt

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John the Evangelist's story of Jesus and the woman at the well is a literary masterpiece. John uses imagery, dialog, symbolism, misunderstanding, double meanings, and different words for the same thing to portray "the steps by which a soul comes to believe in Jesus" and the history of the spread of the Jesus movement to Samaria. (Brown 1966, 185)

The story of Jesus and the woman at the well is not the historical account of an actual event in the life of Jesus. It is "a finely crafted story, rich in details and nuanced conversation, and raising several important themes that permeate the larger Johannine narrative." (Brueggemann et al. 1995, 206) There is enough material in this story for an entire retreat, let alone a brief reflection.

In chapter 3 John used a named man, Nicodemus, to illustrate the journey of faith. Here in chapter 4 John presents an unnamed Samaritan woman as an exemplar for Christian believers and Christian missionaries.

In order to understand what John meant to say we not only have to enter his narrative world; we have to make an attempt at enculturation. We have to put ourselves into the male-oriented, honor-driven, patriarchal society that was taken for granted throughout the Mediterranean world in the first century of our era. We need to pay attention to gender roles and stereotypes that were commonly accepted at that time.

John the Evangelist depicts Jesus as going into hostile territory. Israelites considered the Samaritans to be a bastard people because of their intermarriage with pagan peoples going back to the Assyrian conquest of the eighth century before the Common Era. They were an impure people, and any contact with them made an Israelite impure. The Book of Ezra, chapter 4,

relates how the Samaritans tried to prevent the Judeans from rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple after the Babylonian exile. Samaritans worshipped on Mt. Gerizim near Sychar (ancient Shechem); Israelites worshipped on Mt. Zion (Jerusalem). Samaritans accepted only the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. They rejected all the other books including the prophets and the wisdom literature.

The setting for the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman harkens back to the encounter between Jacob and Rachel described in Genesis, chapter 29. They meet at a "well" (Hebrew: beër), a place for collecting rain water or water that seeps in from the surrounding soil. Beër is opposed to the Hebrew word ain which refers to a fountain or spring on the surface of the ground or coming from a rock, although sometimes the words are used interchangeably. The Greek version of Genesis refers to the place as a "cistern" (Greek: thréar). In Genesis 29 the opening of the well is covered with a large stone.

### **Jesus Alone**

At the beginning of the story Jesus is alone. "His disciples had gone into the town to buy food." He is sitting at the spring of water or fountain. (Greek: pege, not threar or "cistern" as the woman later calls it) Presumably, Jesus is sitting on the stone that covers the opening of the cistern. Jesus would have to get out of the way before the woman could draw water. Also Jesus is sitting on the spring in the traditional posture of a teacher. Possibly in the background of this arresting image is the passage from Exodus found in the first reading of today's Mass. There the Lord says to Moses: "I will be standing in front of you on the rock . . . ." (Exodus 17.6)

John seems to be saying that although the woman thinks she is coming to a cistern to draw water, Jesus, like Moses, is about to release an abundant spring of flowing (living) water. The presence of Jesus transforms the stagnant water of the cistern into a flowing spring of fresh water. It is similar to the marriage feast at Cana where the presence of Jesus transformed an enormous quantity of water into fine wine. (John 2.1-11) Also, at the end of this passage Jesus comes back to the theme of abundance when he refers to the sower and reaper rejoicing together. (v.36) The image is that of crops growing so rapidly that the sower can hardly keep ahead of the reaper.

### **Conversation about Water**

Then comes the woman. As John J. Pilch observes, she was at the wrong place at the wrong time.

*The Mediterranean world is divided according to gender. Women have their places (kitchen, home); men have theirs (outdoors, the fields, the gate, the marketplace). The well is space common to both men and women, but they ought*

*not to be there at the same time. Women can use the place only in morning or evening. Here the woman comes to the well at noon (c.6). Wrong time, and therefore wrong place. (Pilch 1995, 55)*

In the world of John's narrative why did the woman come at noon? Perhaps John was thinking of a situation in which the other women of the village shunned her because of her extramarital exploits. Each of them would have seen her as a threat to her own status as a wife, a status she would lose if her husband were the next to marry the woman. That would explain why the woman could not have come to draw water in the morning or the evening when other women were there.

The whole scene is odd. The Samaritan woman comes into male space and finds a Judean man blocking her access to water. Then Jesus exposes his honor to ridicule by commanding the woman brusquely: "Give me a drink." The surprised woman replies scornfully with no respectful title of address: "How can you, a Judean [man], ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?"

The woman "mocks Jesus for being so in need that he does not observe the proprieties." (Brown 1966, 177) Unrelated men and women didn't speak to each other outside of the home. Later she points out that he doesn't even have a pail. The implication is that if she drew water for him he would have to drink from an unclean Samaritan vessel. (See Brueggeman et al. 1995, 208) Was he ready to stoop so low?

Jesus responds to the woman's shaming language with a two-fold challenge: 1) to recognize who it is who is speaking to her; and 2) to ask him for living water. As the story unfolds, the woman begins addressing Jesus more respectfully as "Sir" and raises the question of whether Jesus is greater than Jacob.

She asks: "Where can you get this living water?" She is thinking of flowing water, but Jesus is referring to water that will give eternal life. This leads to Jesus' final pronouncement about water in his conversation with the woman:

"Everyone who drinks of this water [from the cistern] will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water I will give them [my teaching and my gift of the spirit] will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water [Greek: *pege*] gushing up to eternal life." (NRSV)

Then, she does ask Jesus for this water. With a glimmer of faith and perhaps with sarcasm, the woman moves from scornful derision to piqued interest. However, she still misunderstands Jesus' intent. She wants the living water so that she "may not be thirsty or have to keep coming

here to draw water." She would be glad to be relieved of this burdensome daily chore and the hassle with the other women of the village.

### **Conversation about Marriage**

John's Jesus abruptly changes the subject and adopts a harsher tone. Using the same word that in Matthew's Gospel serves to rebuke Satan and Peter, he tells her, in effect: "Get out of here and come back with your husband so we can continue this conversation in an honorable fashion." John the Evangelist gives particular attention to her reply by introducing it in a way that is used only for Jesus in the rest of this passage. "The woman answered and said to him, 'I have no husband.'"

John has arranged the whole story into seven pairs of statements. This is the fourth statement of Jesus and the fourth statement of the woman. These two statements stand at the very center of the conversation. The woman's declaration is the turning point on her way to becoming one of Jesus' disciples. She has no husband. Unlike most women of her age and in spite of her disreputable past, she has no family ties to keep her from following Jesus. She is eligible to join Jesus' surrogate family.

What kind of woman in first century Samaria would have had five husbands? A formidable one, indeed! Marriage was primarily a union of families and a way for both bride and groom to gain honor for their respective families. People tried to marry up the social scale. Hence, even if all five of her husbands had died, she and her family remained desirable partners. If she had been divorced four or five times, it is all the more remarkable that she found another husband each time. Either she was an extraordinary person or she came from a very powerful family. In any event, Jesus recognizes her as the adventuresome sort who is likely to take the plunge - to defy conventions in order to become one of his followers. She does not disappoint him.

As a result of Jesus' insight into her life, the woman moves from addressing him as "Sir" to recognizing him as a prophet. Jesus, then, for the only time addresses her with a title of respect, "Woman." Elsewhere in John's Gospel Jesus uses the address "Woman" when speaking to his mother at the marriage feast at Cana (2.4), to the woman accused of adultery (8.10), to his mother standing at the foot of the cross (19.26), and to Mary Magdalene weeping at the tomb. (20.15)

Although we have no equivalent usage in modern English, it appears that in John's community "woman" was a title of respect for a female believer. It was similar to the title of "sister" in the Pauline communities. (See Molina and Rohrbaugh 1992, 100. See also 1 Corinthians 9.5 for the combination "sister woman.")

Jesus, then, is addressing her as at least a potential believer and drawing her into the private space of the group of his followers. In that setting further conversation would be culturally appropriate. He also introduces her to the mystery of the Spirit and of worship in spirit and truth that will transcend all sacred locations and spatial boundaries and even the divisions between Samaritans and Jews.

The woman, then, on the very threshold of faith raises the issue of the Messiah. Jesus responds with a declaration which can be read (like many sayings in John's Gospel) in two ways: 1) "I am he, the one speaking with you." or 2) "I AM [the divine name], the one speaking to you." The latter reading reflects the faith of the Johannine church.

### **The Woman as Missionary**

The woman then does another odd thing. She leaves her water jar behind. Is this something like James and John leaving their nets and their father's boat behind in the Synoptic Gospels? She does not head back to the private space of her home where it would be needed. Instead she heads for the public square of the town where she makes a timid profession of faith. She refers to Jesus as a man (carefully avoiding the word "Judean"), puts forth the unlikely possibility that he is the Christ (Messiah), and invites them to come and see for themselves.

This was a clever move. By this deferential approach to the men of the town and by massaging their sense of honor she led them to Jesus. In effect she said: "I know that I am just a woman and probably there is nothing to what I have been thinking, but without ever having met me this man knew as much about my disreputable past as all of you do. He's probably not the Messiah, but he just might be. Maybe you should check him out."

If she had come right out and said, "I think this Judean is the Messiah." they would have hounded her out of the male space of the public square for presuming to try to teach them something. Just as Jesus swallowed his pride to attract her attention, she humbles herself to attract the men to Jesus. She embodies the saying of John the Baptist at the end of the previous chapter in John's Gospel: "He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3.30)

John the Evangelist gives an ironic twist to the men's retort to the woman. John, as narrator, had just said that many of the Samaritan men believed in Jesus because of the word (Greek: *logos*) of the woman. (v. 39) The men, however, tell the woman, "We no longer believe because of your gossip (Greek: *lalía*) for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world." The reader knows that the woman was the most effective of evangelists. She did not want them to believe her; she wanted them to believe Jesus. And she succeeded.

### **A Lesson for Our Time?**

Is there a lesson here for us in the twenty-first century? Perhaps, the lesson is that marginal people have played and continue to play a major role in the spread of Christianity. Marginal people live at the edge of society where they are exposed to another world. They are able to move between those worlds; they are able to change.

In ancient Mediterranean society women were socially more mobile than men. The ideal man never left the home he grew up in. Eventually, he inherited it from his father. Women, however, when they married, had to move into the home of their husband's father and serve under their husband's mother. The Samaritan woman having had five husbands and living with a sixth man had moved around a great deal. She was well acquainted with the male world.

The story of the Samaritan woman at the well reflects the key role that women played in the early Jesus movement. To begin with, having had the experience of leaving one home for another, they were more prepared for the break with their families that membership in the Jesus movement often required.

Moreover, a male entering a strange home would have had little contact with the women of the house, but a traveling woman would have had no problem. Some authors think that the stories of sending apostles and disciples out two by two (See Mark 6.7; Luke 10.1) might reflect the early Jesus movement's practice of sending out teams of male and female missionaries. In their own homes believing women seem to have exerted pressure from below on the children and on the male members of their household. Whereas male missionaries could easily be caught up in a contest of honor with other men, female missionaries sidestepped a confrontational approach.

I am reminded of a public health nurse I knew in the 1970's. Sharon Beatty went to work with women in what was then North or South Yemen. She discovered that in order to communicate with the women there, she had to learn a kind of Arabic that was different from the Arabic spoken in public. She had to learn a dialect that was only spoken in the home. Girls and boys learned this dialect first. When boys came of age they learned to speak the language of the men, which girls and women were never taught to speak.

The point is that in 1970's Yemen only a woman could speak directly to other women about their health needs. An outside man would have had to communicate through the husband or father of the woman. There would have been a similar problem about communicating the good news in the first century, especially given the open hostility to Christianity in the male world. Women evangelists probably played a vital role in spreading Christianity.

Perhaps, we twenty-first century believers owe far more than we know to the quiet labors of first century women symbolized by the Samaritan woman in today's gospel.

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In preparing these reflections, in addition to the biblical texts, I consulted the following works:  
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Fuller 1984 - Reginald H. Fuller, *Preaching the Lectionary. The Word of God for the Church Today* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1984), pp. 45-47.

Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992 - Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 96-105.

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NRSV = NRSV 1994 - New Revised Standard Version - Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, Editors, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible [with the Apocrypha] containing the Old and New Testaments. New Revised Standard Version*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994)

Pilch 1995 - John J. Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A. A Liturgical Press Book* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), pp. 55-57.