

Jesus, gender and race

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 19 March 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Lent 3A

Exodus 17:1-7; John 4: 5-42; Contemporary Reading:
“Blessing of the Well” by Jan Richardson in *Circle of Grace*

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

*By night we travel in darkness, to seek for the living water...*The worship team, read through all of the gospels for Lent a few weeks ago. As a result of that reading we chose, as a focusing image for our services in Lent, water. So we have the waterfall installation that was made by Robyn Floyd. (And we also arranged for it to rain almost every day since Ash Wednesday. So, you can't get away from it!).

Water, essential element of life, enlivening, connecting, drenching, and tragically, in this last week, drowning. Water gives life, and in the wildness of storms, sometimes takes life. We remember the families of the young boy and the older man who died in wild water this last week.

Jesus told Nicodemus (in the reading we heard last week) that to know the reign of God a person must be born of water and of Spirit. The Samaritan woman, of whom we heard today, meets Jesus at the well and water both unites and divides them.

Water, essential to human life, divides in our time too. The tension between the farmers and the environmentalists about use of water in the Murray Darling Basin that Katy Gerner told us about a few weeks ago, after her tour last year. The stand-off between corporate powers and the water-protectors on the Dakota Access Pipeline. The critical need for sources of clean water all over the world which is a focus of some of the Lent Event projects that we have been invited to support.

Jesus speaks of himself as the source of water that eternally quenches thirst, the gift of God for us.

In the Gospel reading, you heard the story of this nameless woman, whom Jesus talked with, on his way north to Galilee. Actually, what you heard is the gospel writer's imaginative recounting of Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman.

I want to give you another imaginative recounting of her meeting with Jesus. I make no claims to historical accuracy. I'm grateful to New Testament scholar Joanna Dewey for her interpretation of the text, on which this re-telling is based.

[Pause to don headscarf and enter character]

I have no name. Well, you do not know my name. And I don't think I will tell you what it is. Throughout the centuries, you Christians have made up so many odd (and some not very nice) things about me that I think I will keep my name to myself. You call me the Samaritan woman—although there were quite a lot of us! Jesus was in Samaria after all!

Or you call me the woman at the well. Really, that's like saying, the woman at the supermarket. I went across the road to Woolworths before. I was quite amazed. Food, for sure, but so much processing and packaging. I do rather like the way that water come out of taps here.

Back in my day, women went to the well for water; we might have to make a dozen or more trips a day to get water; so there's nothing unusual about a woman at the well. Now some of your people, writers of biblical commentaries, make a big deal out of my being there by myself in the middle of the day. They seem to think I'm an outcast in my village because I was there by myself. And it is true that women mostly go out in the morning and in the evening; it makes the work less burdensome when we can talk and sing together. But still, we all go out now and again, during the day too. Sometimes we, or more likely one of our kids, knock over a jug; or sometimes we need more water, or sometimes we just want to get away and be on our own for a little bit. We help one another out, looking after the kids, or we leave them with an older child, and go off alone to the well. The men think we just didn't plan right, and we let them think that, but really we all do need a little space.

So, I'm no outcast, the women and the men of the village like me and respect me. Why wouldn't they? My hospitality is generous; I do my share of the work. Indeed, even in your story, it's clear that I'm respected. The people of the village all listen to me when I come back and tell them about Jesus, and they come out after me to see for themselves. They wouldn't do that if I were an outcast. I think the commentators are just like the disciples, who didn't see why Jesus would be talking with a woman.

Your commentators have made a big deal about all my husbands. But so what? Jesus was just showing me he was wise, a prophet maybe—and so he told me about my life. And he didn't imply that I was evil or shameful. That's your doing. That's part of why I'm here today, to set the story straight.

Besides, that was the beginning of our theological discourse, the longest conversation that Jesus had with anyone. We weren't just talking about me; we were talking about the five gods of Samaria, the gods of my place. To give them credit, some of your commentators did actually manage to work that out.

I'll come back to our theological discourse, Jesus and mine, but first I want you to think about the story that you heard read. Just as Peter and Andrew and James and John left their boats and their nets behind, so I left my water jug.

Just as Andrew heard Jesus and went to get Simon Peter, saying "*We have found the Messiah.*"

Just as Philip found Nathaniel and said, "*We have found the one about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote,*" so I went and told all my village about this man, who could be the Messiah.

And because of my witness, the whole village came out to meet Jesus, and heard for themselves, and came to know that he was the one who would save us, who would lead us to abundant life. But first, it was because of my words that they believed.

One of your better commentators called me the first successful missionary. A nice change from those who tie themselves up in knots about my supposed sexual sins. You Christians have certainly got yourself into a mess about gender and sex and you've completely missed the point of my story because of that.

But I keep forgetting, really. What I want to talk about today is my discourse with Jesus. For that's the real point, the Good News about the Messiah who brings us living water. I'm just one of many women and many men who have told the world about Jesus.

Sadly, many commentators, even Jesus' male disciples in the story, seem to be struck by the fact that Jesus was talking to the likes of me, a woman of Samaria. From the Jewish perspective, I am one of those despicable unclean Samaritans. And from the viewpoint of the Jewish religious leaders, at least, I'm especially unclean because I'm female. But that's to look at my story from *their* perspective. As a Samaritan, I think that the Jews, even Jesus sometimes, are funny uptight people concerned with their own specialness before God. (Do you remember what Jesus said to the Syrophoenician woman about Gentiles being dogs? Well, really!)

And Jesus is here at *my* well, a Samaritan well. And *he's* quite willing to ask me for water.

But I digress again. The real point is my discussion with Jesus. (I keep getting off track responding to all these extraneous matters that the commentators have assumed are the real point.) The *point* of our discussion is about *where* you worship, about where you encounter God. Jesus and I were talking about whether it is Jerusalem (as the Jews think) or the mountain of Samaria (as we Samaritans believe.) And Jesus said the time was coming, indeed is already here, when God is to be worshipped without regard to place, that God could be worshipped anywhere. God is not tied to place.

The Greek text reads that to worship God, as God truly is, is to worship '*in spirit and truth*.'

Spirit and truth are sort of code religious words, don't you think? I expect the Jews in their Temple, while it stood, thought that they were worshipping God in spirit and truth. And I know we Samaritans thought we were, in our holy places. But the Good News of Jesus is that God is not tied to place, that the living water, the fountain of real life, is available to us all everywhere—not just in some particular place, be it Jerusalem, Rome, Constantinople, or Pitt Street Uniting Church in Sydney.

The point is, true worship occurs inside and outside churches, inside and outside denominations, inside and outside all faiths, even outside of what we think of as religion. And neither the Jews nor the Samaritans, nor any of your different churches, has any special claim to worship in 'spirit and truth' more than others.

It's who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage *your* spirit in the pursuit of truth.

Who knows where the water in this well comes from? But we drink it and go on living our lives... I think that's what the gospel writer, who told my story, wanted you to know. That's how the creative, transforming power of the sacred is: who knows where it comes from, but it sustains us and we live our lives differently because of it.

We are called to trust the 'Living Water' so that we can live well, with compassion and with justice, with our God, with one another, with our neighbours and ourselves.

When we experience the creating, transforming power of God, quietly moving through our life; through our life, something changes in us. And if we choose to respond to the gift that is given to us, then we worship, we give worth to, what really matters.

We gather together in community, tell the stories, break the bread, make space for the sacred.

God is sensed in a community that seeks the Sacred together, without regard to place, and any attempt to establish a place as a better, or truer or more spiritual place is human pride; humans putting themselves and their institutions in the place of God.

The point is that God's living water, the true fountain of life, is offered to us all, and I—oops, I almost told you my name, and I said I wasn't going to do that—I, a woman of Samaria, invite and exhort you wherever you are to drink deeply of sacred living water, to enjoy and rejoice in the satisfying water Divine Presence gives us.

You can find this living water in many places, among many people, among women, men, diverse gender identities and sexualities, among people of every race and nation, among the homeless and the refugee, among different faith traditions...

If we open ourselves to it, it sustains us as we live our lives, quietly moving through life, through our life.

So that we might live in Jesus' way, so that we might live life to the full,

love wastefully,

and be all that we can be.

Thank you for stopping and listening and sharing the journey with me.