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BIBLE STUDY

JOHN 4: 1-42

Write about some of the places you remember well from your childhood. Give a vivid description of each place and write about what they mean to you.

Introduction

We know the experience. A chance meeting with another person leads to a relationship that changes our life. The 4th chapter of John's Gospel tells such a story when a woman meets Jesus at a well. What begins with a simple request concludes with a remarkable claim. And through the story important bridges are built between ethnic groups. This story has important implications for building bridges between Indigenous Peoples in Canada and other Canadians.

Read John 4:1-6

The early chapters of John's Gospel picture Jesus on the move. He attends a wedding in Cana of Galilee; he goes to Jerusalem for the Passover; he journeys into the Judean countryside; then he starts back towards Galilee. However, in order to get to Galilee he chooses to travel through Samaria, where he comes to the city of Sychar. Then Jesus arrives at a plot of land Jacob had given to his son, Joseph. Tired from his journey, Jesus sits by the well on this land, Jacob's well.

Wells play an important part in the story of Israel. Abraham's servant found a wife for Isaac at a well. Rebekah not only gave Abraham's servant water to drink from the well, but also watered his camels. Her selfless act caught the servant's attention. Her kindness led to a marriage between Rebekah and Isaac, and the birth of their sons Jacob and Esau. In time, Jacob encountered God at Bethel, and was given the name "Israel" (see Genesis 35:9-13). Our story in John 4 takes place at "Jacob's well," which is also "Israel's well." The covenantal history of Israel lies in the background of this story, including the significance of wells as a meeting place.

Thus, Jesus tired from his journey, sees the well and sits. It's about noon, which means this story takes place in the heat of the day.

Discussion Points

- Do you have a favourite resting place where you can come to a stop when tired?
- Do you recall any chance conversations that have turned out to be important for you?

Read John 4: 7-26

A Samaritan woman came to draw water...

The story we are about to study in the Gospel of John has its own back story. Jesus is a Jew; the woman is a Samaritan. Samaritans and Jews are both rooted in the story of Israel with its twelve tribes forming the nation. But as the monarchy develops in Israel's story, there is a gradual polarization between the ten tribes in the north, centred in Samaria, and the two tribes in the south, centred in Jerusalem. In the 8th century BCE, the nation of Assyria attacks and deports Samaritans as captives. Years later many Samaritans return to rebuild their home, but they are not welcomed by the Judeans. Those tensions are evident in this story as Jesus passes through Samaria.

We never learn the name of this Samaritan woman. We can, however, observe a number of things about her:

- She is a woman, in a very patriarchal society.
- She is a Samaritan, thus an outcast in relation to Jewish society.
- She comes to the well unaccompanied.
- She comes to the well at noon, in the heat of the day.
- She notices immediately that Jesus is a Jew, and is surprised that he asks her for a drink.
- As the conversation proceeds we learn that she is truthful in acknowledging her past five husbands, and that the man she currently lives with is not her husband.
- She has some understanding from her faith background that a Messiah, a Christ, is yet to come.

We could easily project our own values into the experience of this woman, but let's take a moment to consider her from this perspective: "What if this woman with no name needed redemption not from the excesses of sexual promiscuity but from a series of injustices from five husbands in a culture programmed for male domination? Yes, the woman still needs redemption....This woman needs redemption from a life that has been lived in pieces—broken relationships, unsuccessful marriages, societal oppression, poverty (she has to draw her own water), and town gossip (she comes to the well at noon to avoid the others)." (Linda Bridges, Interpretation, April 1994)

Discussion Points

- How might this woman's life reflect the experience of some Indigenous women today?
- What else might be said of Indigenous women today?

... and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."

For most of us, asking for a drink of water is a safe and natural thing to do. We may ask a friend for a drink; we may ask a server in a restaurant for a drink. And when we are given a glass of water we assume it is safe to drink. Yet in many parts of Canada this assumption cannot be taken for granted. In too many First Nations communities water has to be boiled before it can be consumed. Here is one such story:

"Shamattawa First Nation faced a nightmare situation: a widespread COVID-19 outbreak in an isolated community with a housing crisis and no clean water. The current long-term drinking-water advisory has been in place for more than 14 months, and the community in Manitoba's North has experienced these advisories on and off for many years. It has made combating a pandemic, when the importance of clean water is paramount for handwashing and sanitizing, that much more difficult for Shamattawa and dozens of other First Nations." (Kristy Kirkup, The Globe and Mail, March 1, 2021)

Discussion Points

- What would it be like to be a parent having to give a child boiled water to drink?
- What would it be like to be a visitor to Shamattawa and ask for a drink of water?
- What risks was Jesus taking to ask this Samaritan woman for a drink?

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

It can be helpful for our study to recall the way water is used as an image for salvation in the Bible:

- "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." (Isaiah 12:3)
- The Lord accuses Israel because "they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13)
- On the last day of the festival, Jesus cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me, drink." (John 7:37-39)

Notice how the conversation between the woman and Jesus moves along. Jesus trusts the woman to come to her own understanding, until such time as she states her understanding about the coming Messiah. Jesus then responds directly, "I am he, the one speaking to you." This is the first time in the Gospel of John that Jesus acknowledges his identity: "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." This phrase, "I am," echoes God's self-identification in the Old Testament, such as Exodus 3:14. And Jesus draws from this language to speak of himself with images like, "I am the bread of life...I am the light of the world...I am the resurrection and the life" (See John 6:35; 8:12; 11:25).

Discussion Points

- As you think about the Samaritan woman in this conversation, what longings or hopes do you think the words of Jesus are stirring in her mind and heart?
- Why do you think Jesus used many images like this to speak of the salvation he offers?

Read John 4: 27-42

“Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city.”

The rest of the story leaves the conversation between the woman and Jesus, and brings others into the picture. She returns to her home and informs the people of Sychar about this man who might be the Messiah – Samaritans also looked for the Messiah. At the same time, the disciples of Jesus return from their shopping expedition and have to wonder about Jesus meeting up with this woman at a well. The looks they gave said everything! Finally the Samaritans from the city come to the well themselves, and ask Jesus to stay with them. After two days they believe, not just because of the woman’s testimony but because of what they have heard themselves. And they state their conviction that this Jesus, who crossed ethnic boundaries to ask for a drink of water is “truly the Saviour of the world” (John 4:42).

Building Bridges:

It has been observed that in asking this woman for a drink, Jesus crosses at least three boundaries:

1. Gender: it would have been most unusual, if not socially unacceptable, for Jesus to initiate a conversation like this with a woman. In some cultures today, such a conversation is equivalent to sexual intercourse.
2. Moral: that this woman comes alone to the well indicates that she is not likely a welcomed participant in her own community. Jesus risks being associated with such a person.
3. Ethnic: note that this Gospel acknowledges Jews did not share things in common with Samaritans. In fact, the bucket from which she drew water would have been considered “unclean,” in the sense that it was religiously impure.

Discussion Points

- What kinds of boundaries exist between Indigenous Peoples and others in Canada?
- What can we do to help overcome some of those boundaries?
- What wells do Indigenous peoples draw from to refresh others?

...this is truly the Saviour of the world.

John's Gospel begins with a remarkable claim regarding Jesus of Nazareth: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." (John 1:1-3)

Observe: this is the same person who was tired, sat at a well, and asked for a drink of water. It is also the same person who risked crossing many boundaries in order to build trust with this Samaritan woman.

Discussion Points

- From your interaction with this story in John's Gospel, what do you think it means to call Jesus the Saviour of the world?
- What would it mean for Indigenous and Canadian/ Settler to drink of the water that Jesus gives, and gushes into eternal life?