

**SERMON – YEAR A – LENT 3**  
**Saint Barnabas Church – March 9, 2017**

Who is in? Who is out?

Relevant question for our times – see article in current Atlantic Monthly

The Samaritan Woman is both disciple and missionary. She is not named, making it possible for her to represent a collective (Samaritans and women). Her story reflects the post resurrection, post ascension experiences of the Samaritan mission and the influence of Samaritan converts within the community around the author of John.

This story legitimizes the young church's mission to Samaria, establishing full equality between Samaritan Christians and Jewish Christians in the Johannine community. The opening sentence ("It was his disciples who were baptizing, *not Jesus himself*,") as well as the conclusion give us clues for when it was written. Disciples, not Jesus, are now responsible for initiation rites into the life of the Christ.

The conclusion is a post-resurrection confession of faith. "We believe *Jesus is the Saviour of the world*." This confession moves a post-Easter experience and proclamation back in time into the life of the earthly Jesus.

The evangelist has written a narrative about the mission to the Samaritans in order to insert the presence of Samaritans into the gospel. The author says the presence of the Samaritans in the Johannine community is the result of Jesus' own initiative and the work of evangelization is assigned to a disciple – the unnamed woman at the well.

Neither Mathew, nor Mark nor Luke suggests Jesus exercised any ministry among the Samaritans. Luke 9:52 explicitly says "the Samaritans refused to receive him." Matthew 10:5 reports Jesus told the Twelve not to enter any Samaritan town. The first Christian mission to Samaria is reported in Acts 8, after the death of Stephen.

In today's story, Jesus was said to be traveling from Judaea to Galilee, passing through Samaria where he stops to rest at Jacob's well. There Jesus meets a Samaritan woman.

The meeting of a man and a woman at a well is a "type" story, one that follows a particular pattern in the Bible. A well is where a man finds his future wife, a woman who will play a central role in salvation history. Isaac's future wife, Rebecca, is found by Abraham's servant at the well of Nabor. Jacob meets Rachel at the well in Haran. Moses receives Zipporah as wife after his rescue at the well in Midian. Jesus meets a woman disciple at Jacob's Well.

Jacob's Well is the most famous (and most important) well in Israel, the Northern Kingdom. Solomon's sons divided David's united kingdom into Israel and Judah. Then, in 721 BCE, the Assyrians destroyed Israel. The remaining scattered communities made up Samaria. The Jews of Jerusalem looked down on the Samaritans who based their "Jewish" faith only on Torah, the first five books of scripture.

The woman and Jesus engage in theological discussion. She questions his breaking with Jewish custom by speaking in public to a woman and by asking to share utensils with a Samaritan. She challenges his implication, in the offer of living water, that he is on a par with the patriarch Jacob who gave the well to Israel.

In the midst of their discussion, Jesus tells her to call your husband, and she answers "I have no husband." This is the point at which the story touches me most deeply – and I believe it touches you deeply as well.

These sentences are not about her sexuality – they are about Samaritan religious intuition and practice. The Samaritan woman is not a whore, not promiscuous, not spiritually dead or "hopelessly carnal." For too long her story has been sold to us as a sexual morality tale based on an interpretation of the woman as a

sinner because she had “five husbands.” This false interpretation serves patriarchy, not scripture. It reduces women to their sexuality and reduces their sexuality to immorality.

This question about the Samaritan’s husbands is another “type” story found in the Bible. The “husbands” are symbolic, not literal. The use of adultery with idolatry symbolism is prevalent in the prophetic literature and speaks of Israel’s infidelity to YHWH the Bridegroom. “Husbands” means “lords” or “gods.” Samaria has had five foreign gods since the Assyrians destroyed Israel (2 Kings 17:30-31) and the god Samaria worships now is not YHWH, but from Rome.

The statement Samaria “has no husband” is a classic prophetic denunciation of false worship – like Hosea’s oracle in which the prophet expresses God’s sentiments toward unfaithful Israel. (Hosea 2:2) Jesus is a prophet in the prophetic tradition of the Northern Kingdom, the tradition of Micah, Amos, Obadiah, Habakkuk and Hosea.

John’s Gospel has already identified Jesus as the true Bridegroom who supplied good wine for the wedding feast at Cana. John the Baptist identified Jesus as the true Bridegroom to whom God has given the New Israel as bride. Now we hear the marriage story between Jesus and Samaria, represented by the woman at the well. The new Bridegroom assumes the role of YHWH, bridegroom of ancient Israel, and comes to claim Samaria as an integral part of the New Israel, specifically the New Israel as lived in the Johannine Christian community.

Jesus is wooing Samaria: the Bridegroom has come for his Bride.

Continuing the theological discussion, the woman asks Jesus where true worship will be found. His response transcends both the Jewish claim for Jerusalem and the Samaritan claim for Mount Gerizim in favor of worship in spirit and in truth. Those who worship in Jerusalem and those who worship on Mount Gerizim are called to transcend their particularistic traditions and find their common identity in Jesus who is the Truth.

The woman tells Jesus of her hope for the Messiah, and Jesus tells her “I am he. *Ego eimi*. This is the first use of the “I am” formula in John’s Gospel. I am Door, Good Shepherd, The Way, Bread of Life. The “I am” of the revelation to Moses (Ex.3:14) is the very designation Samaritans preferred for God. Jesus reveals himself to be both a prophet in the tradition of Moses (not a new David) and the messiah who comes to restore true worship in Israel.

**Religious, ethnic, tribal particularities must be transcended. Our unity is in Jesus the Christ.**

The disciples do not ask why Jesus was talking with a *Samaritan*, but they are astonished to find him talking with a *woman*. By the time this Gospel was written, the issue of integration of Samaritans into the community had been settled but the issue of the role of women was still under debate.

Like the disciples in the synoptic gospels who left nets, boats, parents, tax collection, the woman leaves her water-jar and goes off to tell her good news to the town. Ordinary concerns are abandoned, left behind, to follow Jesus.

Many of the townspeople “came to believe in him”. “Come to Jesus is a Johannine expression for beginning to believe. The woman’s evangelism is effective.

They pressed him to stay or remain with them. “To remain” or “to dwell” is a term for union with Jesus. These new believers are coming to full Johannine faith in Jesus as the Christ, proclaiming him “Saviour of the world.”

The mission to the Samaritans is in the hands of the unnamed woman. The woman sows the seed that other disciples will harvest. Those others will participate as “reapers.” They do not initiate the mission and it is not under their control. Perhaps the author of the fourth gospel had some experience of women Christians

as theologians and apostles, was aware of the tension this aroused in the community, and wanted to present Jesus as legitimating female participation in male-appropriated roles.

And you and I? Perhaps we need to be prepared to witness and experience the revelation of the God's creating, sustaining and redeeming presence in unexpected ways and from unexpected sources. When have you had a deep theological discussion with Jesus? Who brought you living water? Who responded to the emptiness of your spirit? Who revealed to you the true God who knows everything you have ever thought and done and who loves and accepts you regardless? To whom have you shown God's radical love of acceptance? Have you asked Jesus to abide with you? What are the ordinary concerns you need to throw away by the roadside in order to follow Jesus?

Our most important question to answer is this: Who is In? Who is Out?