

## *A Path to Perception*

John 4:5-42

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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<sup>5</sup>So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup>Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

<sup>7</sup>A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." <sup>8</sup>(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) <sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." <sup>11</sup>The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? <sup>12</sup>Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" <sup>13</sup>Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup>but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." <sup>15</sup>The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

<sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." <sup>17</sup>The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; <sup>18</sup>for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" <sup>19</sup>The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup>Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup>You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup>But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. <sup>24</sup>God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." <sup>25</sup>The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." <sup>26</sup>Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

<sup>27</sup>Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" <sup>28</sup>Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, <sup>29</sup>"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" <sup>30</sup>They left the city and were on <sup>31</sup>Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." <sup>40</sup>So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. <sup>41</sup>And many more believed because of his word. <sup>42</sup>They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." (NRSV)

In last Sunday's sermon, we pondered one of the better-known stories in the Bible—the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3. It turns out that this woman in John 4, whose story we've just heard, is nearly an exact opposite to Nicodemus.

The contrasts between Nicodemus and this woman are striking. An obvious difference is that we know his name—Nicodemus—but not her name. Of course she actually did have a name, but we aren't told what it is, so we have to call her "the woman" or "the woman of Samaria." Another difference is that Nicodemus is Jewish, while she is Samaritan. He is male; she is female. He is a respected and well-known

leader in the capital city of Jerusalem; but she is an ordinary peasant known only to the people of Sychar, her home village. Nicodemus talks to Jesus at night, giving their meeting an aura of secrecy; while the woman talks to Jesus at noon, when the sun is brightest, and at the town well, perhaps the most public and frequently-visited place in the whole village.<sup>1</sup>

There is at least one other important difference between Nicodemus and this woman of Sychar, and this difference is what I want to explore with you this morning.

Nicodemus seems to have a hard time coming to faith in Jesus at this point in the gospel. He's an intelligent, well-educated man; and yet when Jesus starts talking about being born again, and being born from above, Nicodemus seems totally confused. He doesn't understand what Jesus means. He fails to perceive the deeper meaning of Jesus' words; and because he doesn't grasp the deeper meaning, he doesn't come to faith in Jesus, at least not yet. Nicodemus does help to bury Jesus after the crucifixion, which might mean that he eventually comes to faith (19:38-42). But in chapter 3, Nicodemus is still having a hard time. Even today, the church has lots of skeptics like Nicodemus who ask hard questions and struggle with certain aspects of Christian faith. It's ok to do that. Nicodemus has a bit of a bad reputation—just consider the fact that no Christian parent names their son “Nicodemus”—yet most congregations have at least a couple of Nicodemuses; and I say, bless them! The church has room for people who are on their way toward faith, who are not yet completely convinced, who do not yet fully perceive all they want to perceive.

But enough of Nicodemus. Today I'm more interested in the woman from Sychar, Samaria, who also asks questions in her conversation with Jesus, but who comes to faith in him much more quickly, and more easily, than Nicodemus did.

For many years, people in the church have jumped to the conclusion that this woman is guilty of some kind of sexual sin. In fact, Jesus does say, and she agrees, that she has had five husbands, and that the man she is now with is not officially her husband (vv. 17-18). Based on these facts, people have assumed she must be some sort of a so-called “loose” woman, perhaps even a prostitute. But let us be fair and realize there could easily

be another interpretation of the facts. She could simply be trapped in a Levirate marriage, which is explained in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 and referred to in Luke 20:27-33. If a husband died without a son, Levirate marriage required one of the husband's brothers to marry the widow so that children could be born. We know from the story of Tamar in Genesis 38 that multiple brothers sometimes did actually marry the same woman in succession in an effort to bear children. That same story also shows that some men were reluctant to keep this law. Therefore this woman in John 4 could have had a succession of five husbands, all of them brothers; and the most recent of these brothers could be refusing to marry her officially. Therefore I think we should give this woman the benefit of the doubt and refrain from jumping to a conclusion that the facts do not require us to make. Nowhere in this story does Jesus condemn her for doing anything immoral. Neither should we.<sup>2</sup>

Let us further notice that when it comes to theological discussion, this woman holds up her end of the conversation. She may not be well-educated, but that doesn't mean she's stupid or slow. To the contrary, her words suggest that she is both intelligent and perceptive. Jesus respects her as a worthy conversationalist; let us do the same.

The conversation between him and her has many more facets than one sermon could ever explore. So let me focus on only one slice of the story: on how this woman sees beneath the surface of ordinary things and successfully perceives the deeper meaning of what is happening to her.

As the story begins, she is having an ordinary day. Every day, probably, she carries a jar to the village well for water to use in her cooking and cleaning. It's ordinary, routine housework. Then in the middle of this ordinary housework, a series of six surprising things starts to happen, all of which catch her attention. First, she finds a Jewish man already at the well. Second, he asks for a drink. Third, he talks about having living water that gives eternal life. Fourth, this stranger, without asking, already knows about her five husbands. The fifth odd thing is his claim that we can worship God anywhere in the world, not just on this mountain or that mountain. The sixth and most surprising thing of all is when he plainly tells her, "I am" the Messiah whom you are looking for.

As they talk, the woman allows herself to be led deeper and deeper beyond the surface of things. This man looks ordinary; yet half-way through she realizes he is some kind of prophet; and by the end she suspects he really is the Messiah. Her ordinary act of housework becomes an extraordinary moment. More than just housework is going on here. As she permits herself to be led deeper, below the daily grind of carrying water, her perception grows of a deeper reality. Her excitement builds. Her spirit leaps.

Do you know what this is like? Have you yourself experienced it?

Recently I talked to a man whose ordinary lunch one day turned into something quite extraordinary. He eats lunch every day. No big deal: sit down at the table, pick up a sandwich, or spear the green beans with a fork, and put the food into your mouth. Chew, swallow, and take another bite until the plate is clean. Get up, wash the dishes, and go back to work. It happens every day.

On this particular day, he ate watermelon for lunch. The watermelon was perfectly ripe: juicy, sweet, crisp, deeply flavorful. He focused all his thoughts on this watermelon and for several minutes thought about nothing else except the watermelon. As he delighted in these tastes, he allowed himself to go deeper than the watermelon. He looked and tasted beyond the watermelon itself. Gradually a door swung open in his inner consciousness, and he perceived that God was also sweet and savory, that God loved him overwhelmingly, that God was closer to him than the watermelon was to his tongue. At that moment a deep, intense feeling of God flooded through this man and he knew, even to the marrow of his bones and the synapses of his brain, that nothing is more real than the reality of God.

Both this man, and the woman at the well, moved from sight to insight. They allowed the sight, taste, touch, and sounds of ordinary life to beckon them toward a deeper reality. They perceived that the world has far more substance to it than what we know through our five senses. That deeper substance connects us to God. In that moment we perceive that God truly is I am.

The process for perceiving the I am reality of God can be quite simple. Here's one process you can try out if you're interested. It's not the only way to do this, but it is one way.

First, find a spot relatively free of other distractions, where you can more easily focus on the present moment.

Second, choose something to focus on with your eyes, your nose, your ears, your mouth, or your fingers. It might be a watermelon, a rose, the sound of the note E, a seashell, whatever.

Third, let your total awareness rest on the details of that thing you have chosen. Allow yourself to explore, savor, and delight in this thing which is ultimately a creation of God.

Fourth, notice what feeling, image, or thought arises within you. Stay with that that feeling, image, or thought for at least a little bit.

Fifth, permit the Holy Spirit, who is the presence of Jesus in this world, to lead you to some open door through which you can perceive the wonderful, delightful, joyful reality of God, who is the only I am worth knowing.

And sixth, go tell someone what happened. Become a witness to what you have perceived through sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch. Live the perception. Live the blessing. Live the reality of God.

#### Notes

1. Craig Koester, "Hearing, Seeing, and Believing in the Gospel of John," *Biblica*, 70:3 (1989), 333.
2. Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 567.