

It's a good thing Jesus is sitting down for this rather lengthy chat. He talks with this nameless Samaritan woman longer than with any of the people that he healed or enlightened. Longer than any of his talks with Peter or any of the apostles. Jesus didn't talk this much with scribes or Pharisees or even with Pontius Pilate. In all of Christian scripture, the longest conversation that Jesus has with *any human* is this one.

That's more than just a bit of trivia that will win some bar bets. There's a reason that John's Jesus gets into such a lengthy and intimate dialogue with this woman. In fact, she is so essential to the heart of John's Gospel that the Orthodox have given her a name: Photina. It means "the enlightened one."

The name chosen for her and the length of the conversation make sense as the second part of a story that began with Nicodemus. This is the rest of a realistic story that illustrates the poetry of the Prologue. Like Nicodemus, Photina is unique to John's Gospel. Her part of the story gives evidence to the way that God gives love to the entire world.

First, the Gospel writer has to get Jesus to Samaria, specifically to a city called Sychar, a derogatory Judean nickname for the place where Jacob's well can still be found. There is no *practical* reason for Jesus to be there.

Jesus and his followers are traveling between Galilee and Jerusalem. But Jews in those days, usually crossed the Jordan to move up and down the east bank so that they could avoid the risks of encountering Samaritans.

Acutely aware of the breach between Samaritans and Judeans, the Gospel author has a crucial *theological* reason to take Jesus several miles west of the normal route. The complex estrangement between Samaritans and Judeans was centuries old by the time this story was captured.

The Samaritans traced their origin to the ancient Northern Kingdom of Israel. The name "Samaritan" means "keeper of the law" and the law that they kept was the Pentateuch; the first five books of Hebrew scripture. They worshipped not in Jerusalem, but on nearby Mt. Gerizim.

First century Jews who descended from the Southern Kingdom of Judea dismissed the Samaritan ancestral claim. Judeans insisted that Samaritan intermarriages with their Assyrian conquerors had nullified their Jewish purity and the purity of the land. Centuries of bitterness separate these children of Abraham and so Samaria is the last place on earth that John's audience would expect Jesus to go to demonstrate God's love.

Incredibly, John's Jewish Jesus crossed ethnic, political and religious borders into Samaria specifically to reveal that God's love is given for all of

creation. To make known that God gave Christ, the light of all people, even to those who can't imagine themselves to be the focus and the home of God's love.

And because God's love is both universal and particular, the Gospel writer presents a range of differences in the form of Nicodemus and this Samaritan woman. They each have particular encounters with Jesus and each comes away from those encounters radiating the universal light of Christ in their own way.

Last week, John's Gospel introduced a man with a name, Nicodemus, who was an elite leader of the Jews in Jerusalem. His *first* encounter with Jesus lasted all of nine verses. Nicodemus went to Jesus in darkness, knowing from signs that he had seen that Jesus was a teacher from God.

This morning, Jesus went to a woman in the light of noon day. Her *only* encounter with Jesus goes on for 37 verses. She is nameless in scripture and John's audience would have considered her the "wrong kind" of Jew. Jesus, to her, is nothing more than a thirsty Jewish stranger at first.

She is a Samaritan, so her ethnic and religious roots are in the ancient Northern Kingdom of Israel. And she is talking with Jesus, whose ethnic and religious roots are in the ancient Southern Kingdom of Judea.

Now, there are multiple descriptions in Hebrew Scripture of God's being married to both Israel and Judah. And the Hebrew books of Jeremiah and Hosea say that while God's marriage to the Southern Kingdom was interrupted, God's marriage to the Northern Kingdom ended in divorce.

That matters because in this Gospel story, Jesus makes overtures of reconciliation with undertones of marital intimacy. The Samaritan woman has had five husbands and is living with a sixth man to whom she is not married. For centuries, Western Christians have been content to paint this woman as a harlot or as a sinful woman. I find that disappointing because, you see, there is something larger going on.

Judeans explained that God divorced the Samaritans' ancestors because they had committed a form of adultery by worshipping five foreign gods. Jesus seems to acknowledge that the Samaritans are at least partially faithful to the old marriage covenant with God by saying "the one you have now is not your husband." He unlocks a door. The dialogue deepens.

Regardless of whether John means to imply a metaphoric fracturing, this woman has clearly experienced a series of broken intimate relationships. She may have been widowed or divorced time and again, and she faces a life-threatening disruption with the community.

She is collecting water, not in the cool of the morning or in the evening when the other women of the town typically gathered. John's audience would have taken that to mean that the town has shunned her. She is alone and at risk in the heat of the day when a strange Judean speaks to her.

And there in the brightest light of the day, Jesus enlightens her: Photina.

It's not coincidental that Jesus and Photina meet at Joseph's well. First century listeners would have immediately envisioned this site as the well where Rebekah accepted Isaac's wedding proposal. They would have remembered that Isaac and Rebekah's son Jacob saw Rachel for the first time at this very same well. This is where Jacob and Rachel first kissed. Then for seven years, he adored her and worked to win her until she finally married him. Moses rested beside this well after escaping Egypt. Here, he met Zipporah, whom he later married and relied on for support in freeing the Hebrew slaves.

By setting Jesus and Photina together at this well, the Gospel writer evokes a choir just beneath the conversation. The voices of Rebekah and Isaac, Jacob and Rachel, Moses and Zipporah joined by the wedding party at Cana all gently singing about the beloved in the Song of Songs. The Gospel leaves no question as to the intimacy of the irrevocable bond that God desires.

To frame the relationship in such personal terms indicates the fullness of the spectrum of intimacy that God desires with all creation. In Photina's story, Jesus moved her from an outsider into the inner circle of his friends and followers, where Nicodemus began.

Unlike Nicodemus, Photina moves quickly in her understanding and her trust in Jesus. She knows that the Messiah called Christ is coming. Where Nicodemus struggles, Photina comprehends. Jesus speaks the name of God to her. "I am," Jesus says. The Greek text does not say "I am *he*," but simply "I am. The one that speaks to you."

The astonished disciples arrive as Photina leaves her water jar behind to *go* and *proclaim* just like other apostles left their nets to *come* and *follow*. She goes home bearing the light that has come into the darkness. She goes out with all her brokenness and all her questioning, but without defensiveness or shame, to share the light of Christ.

Funny thing about light. We don't actually see light. We see *by* it. We see the world that light illuminates for us. We can, however, see parts of light when it is broken. When light is broken up by water droplets, we see colors. We see rainbows.

Just so, the full light of Christ shines through and around each one of us as it did through and around Photina, the one enlightened by Christ. Each of us

radiates only a part of the true light – a shade, a hue – but that light is made visible only by our unique brokenness.

The one life that is the light of all people has come into being. And that one light shines through my particular brokenness in a different way than that same light shines through each of you. Collectively, we send out not just colors, but rainbows.

You see, ours is not to be the one true light on our own. Ours is to give and nurture God's love in our own unique ways, beaming and reflecting the light of Christ together. One sows, another reaps. In that way, whether in the brightest light of day or deepest darkness of night, people can hear the Word made Flesh for themselves and meet the Savior of God's entire creation.

Even now, the fields are ripening.

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