

“He Told Me Everything I Ever Did” (John 4:1-42)

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Listen to John 4:1-42. Pay attention to the characters mentioned in the story and who they are. What is said about them? After we're done, I want you to guess who you think the sermon will be about today.

Who were the main characters listed? Why do you think the sermon will be about them?

Jesus and the woman at the well bring the genuine main character energy. That's not an insult – they are genuinely the main characters of this scripture! But this whole section of scripture begins with the disciples and ends with the Samaritan people of Sychar. And – spoiler alert – it ends with the Samaritan people as disciples, too!

Chapter 4 begins with the disciples. Well, yes, technically it starts with Jesus, but we see something about the disciples that we very easily overlook. ***Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John— although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. (John 4:1-2)*** For some reason, I rarely think of Jesus baptizing people. Even less so do I think of his disciples baptizing people. The author of John is very intent on us understanding how deeply the disciples were invested in the ministry of Jesus. We often think of them as observing and learning and often being very confused by Jesus. But Jesus had them doing the work of ministry with him.

Samaria wasn't a planned destination for Jesus and the disciples. They were heading from Judea to Galilee and took the shortest route to get there by going through Samaria. Samaria was a region the Jewish people of Jesus' day tried to avoid. Most travelling from Judea to Galilee would take the long way just to avoid Samaria. But they head through there anyway. Jesus stops at a well, and the disciples leave, heading into town to buy food.

Even though it's established that the disciples are deeply involved in the ministry of Jesus, they miss the entire next segment of the story. They miss the majority of the story. Jesus has this massive theologically rich conversation with this Samaritan woman.

Last week we looked at John 3. Who did Jesus interact with in John 3 last week? Tell me about that guy.

Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus makes sense! Jesus and Nicodemus share a common faith. Nicodemus, understanding that Jesus is from God, knows he is to be keenly attentive to Jesus. After all, Nicodemus is supposed to be interested and curious about the things of God. Jesus and Nicodemus are both men, which in that culture at that time was important. This was an appropriate one on one conversation to have.

But Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman is amusing and surprising – from the start we recognize this interaction should not happen! “Jesus is male, single, religious, Jewish, and clearly defined social boundaries ought to keep him from speaking with a woman in such a private setting.”¹

All from Jesus asking the woman for a drink, Jesus and the woman embark in a deep, significant, and embattled conversation. Nicodemus asks Jesus questions and spends the majority of their interaction confused. But there's give and take in the interactions between the Samaritan woman and Jesus. Our readers this morning were polite in their reading of the conversation, and we often read this story in our mind's ears assuming both Jesus and the Samaritan have respectful tone in their conversation. But they are speaking of massive divides. The divide between Jews and Samaritans culturally. The divide that exists religiously. Jesus probes deeply into the personal details of her life, revealing that he knows who she really is.

And then this interaction happens: **The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”**

²⁶ **Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”**

And then the disciples return. They have missed all of this – the embattled conversation, the significant teaching. (They probably wouldn't have been much help, would have overdefended Jesus and probably wouldn't have let the Samaritan woman get a word in edgewise anyway!) But they missed all of it. Every last word.

Besides, when they witness this interaction, they find it to be awkward. They find it downright inappropriate! **His disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”** But they thought it!

Despite the awkwardness they feel about Jesus and the Samaritan woman conversing, they do get to see that the Samaritan woman is convinced! She runs into the town of Sychar to tell others. ²⁸ **Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people,** ²⁹ **“Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?”** ³⁰ **They came out of the town and made their way toward him.**

The disciples in the meantime try to care for Jesus, telling him to eat the food they purchased in the town of Sychar. And Jesus tells them that his food **“is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.”** His food is interactions with people like the Samaritan woman. His food is to connect with and lead the people that his disciples and others find too awkward and too inappropriate.

He then tells them how God works. He tells them about how God leads people to Godself.

¹The NIV Application Commentary: John, Gary M. Burge, 156.

³⁵ Don't you have a saying, 'It's still four months until harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. ³⁶ Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. ³⁷ Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. ³⁸ I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.'

Jesus lets them know there is a harvest coming. People turning to God. People turning from their old ways to follow God's way. People turning from life on their own strength and struggle to people empowered and indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God. People put in the work of difficult conversations, people put in the work of loving and gracious presence, some people put in the work of dedicated service and kindness – and people come to Jesus and everyone rejoices.

In this entire passage, who was the one that did the hard work of interaction and conversation and kindness and engagement? It was Jesus.

So who do you think are the ones that get to reap the benefits of his labour? The disciples. They leave Jesus alone, just for the afternoon, and they return and he's been up to all kinds of mischief. He's been talking to people he shouldn't talk to in a place he probably shouldn't be. And the result they get to see is many people coming to meet, learn from, and follow Jesus. They get to see the harvest that results from the work that Jesus has invested, and the harvest is coming right at them!

The beginning of John 4 tells us that the disciples were baptizing people who were becoming followers of Jesus. I like to think that this story ends with the disciples baptizing the Samaritan people that have decided to follow Jesus. People they would have never thought they would ever be baptizing! Even if they did not baptize these Samaritans, they would eventually baptize Samaritans as well as people of every nation and tribe and culture that they experienced.

Just like the disciples we oblivious to the conversation Jesus was having with the Samaritan woman, we are often oblivious to the conversations Jesus is having with people. We don't know what conflicts Jesus is having internally with people. We don't know what affirmations Jesus is telling people. We don't know what Jesus is revealing to people about himself and about our world.

Jesus initiates these conversations. Like being at work in Samaria, there is no space on earth where Jesus isn't already at work. He makes himself known to people in ways we are oblivious to. He sits by the well. Maybe he sits ON THE WELL. Imagine this poor Samaritan woman, who comes to the well in the afternoon so she can just be left alone. She comes to the well alone. And there's this guy, this Jewish guy, just interrupting her solitary space! And then he asks her a question. And then there's this whole conversation that results. And then she becomes a follower of Jesus.

Jesus is always at work. Always. He's initiating conversations that we do not see. The command of Jesus for us today is "open your eyes". SEE what I am doing! Look! See the people around you, especially the unlikely ones.

Gary Burge writes: **“Jesus delights in breaking traditional cultural barriers that separate people. He takes a risk. He reaches out. He speaks. And, John would have us reflect, if Jesus is willing to speak to her, who won’t he speak to in the first century or today?”** Who are the people you have dismissed as unlikely. Who are the people you would rather avoid. Chances are good Jesus has been having some interesting conversations with them.

We find ourselves in the place the disciples were – totally oblivious. We know only a fraction of what is happening in people’s lives. But Jesus is always at work. Be alert and be ready to Jesus to surprise you with what he’s been up to.

The final voice we hear is the voice of the harvest. The Samaritans of Sychar have the final word. **“We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”**

Who is on the edge of a breakthrough that you need to be attentive to? God, give us patience with people we have low tolerance for. Make us attentive to where you are at work. Give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and give us the faith to believe you are at work in unlikely ways.