Labels

A reflection on John 4: 5 – 42

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church March 15, 2020

What labels have you accumulated in your life? Labels are different from nicknames. Nicknames usually have affection behind them. Labels range from the merely factual to the demeaning. We give them to ourselves. Consciously. Unconsciously. “Short” is my go-to. “You’re short! You have to be on the front row.” (Said every time a group photo is being taken.) I’m sure Gillie gets weary of the label: “blind.” It’s the “go-to” descriptor. Not meant with condescension but nonetheless it is just the thinnest veneer of who Gillie is. I imagine Jazmine gets tired of people commenting on her height. I know I’m short. Gillie knows she’s blind. Jazmine knows she’s tall. My husband knows he is bald. Again, not intended to demean or belittle. Just facts. Sometimes, though, labels go beyond the factual.

The woman at the well has been labeled a “slut” since ages of days, a sinner in deep need of Jesus’ redemption. That’s true of all of us, isn’t it? The redemption part? But what isn’t anywhere in the text is an indication that Jesus thinks she is sexually immoral. He names the facts: you’ve had five husbands. For a woman who did not have the ability to divorce a man, this is not of her doing! Widowed five times? Perhaps. Divorced five times? Some combination of the two…all of those are possibilities, so don’t dress her in a seductive outfit and imagine her purring at Jesus. She’s dressed like every other woman, and her conversation is extremely intelligent.

What a counterpoint to Nicodemus! Last Sunday we heard his story. Nicodemus, the highly regarded Jewish pharisee who came to Jesus under cover of darkness to discuss deep theological concepts. Frances Taylor Gench in her book, *Back to the Well,* writes:

*They (Nicodemus and the woman) are at opposite ends of the social, political, and religious spectrum. One is named and male; the other is an unnamed female. One is a distinguished religious leader, a pillar of the community; the other is a despised foreigner with an irregular marital history. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night; the Samaritan woman encounters Jesus at noon, in the fullest light of day.* (p. 112)

And note what happens in each encounter. In Nicodemus’ story, Jesus offers us a monologue about his work of redeeming the world. In the woman’s story, we hear a vibrant dialogue between two people. Questions and responses, and action! While Nicodemus disappears into the night, the woman leaves her water jar behind and goes back to town to tell everyone about her encounter with the prophet Jesus. (Shouldn’t someone ask, if she was so disrespected in town, why would they listen to her in the first place?)

I don’t say this to demean Nicodemus. His story is his own, and we know that later he did stand up for Jesus, later he brought spices to anoint Jesus’ body. He had his own moments of illumination in the midst of the darkness. His silence does not equate with lack of understanding. Perhaps it reveals reflection and meditation?

Gench describes all these assumptions about the woman’s character as “interpretive litter.” What does interpretive litter do? It buries the truth. It prevents us from seeing, from hearing the richness of this story. The fact that Jesus knows she has five husbands isn’t a statement about the woman: it’s a statement about Jesus. Here is a rabbi, a prophet, who has come to a well to drink, and has asked an enemy for water. He needs her trust. He is dependent upon her for water to sustain his body. Now she will learn that he has water to sustain her soul. Each caring for the other. Each providing for the other. His statement about her marital status allows her to see him as someone unlike anyone she has met before. It is a statement of fact. The church has twisted it into a label of “slut.” Time to let it go.

Some theologians see in this story an allegory. Was she an actual woman, or was this a fable which could be used with the early Christian community to challenge their ideas of welcome? Jesus meets the woman at the well, and this is a theme John’s audience would have recognized. The stories of their ancestors: Isaac met Rebecca, Jacob met Rachel and Moses met Zipporah. Love is found at the well! That’s a critical clue…and yet this is a more expansive image than marriage. God, clothed as Jesus, comes to an unnamed Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. Jesus comes, not to find a spouse, but to welcome an entire group of people who have been excluded. Jesus comes to mend a rift that took place within the Jewish community.

Jesus comes and breaks down this system in which there is one right place for worship. “Is it Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim?” she asks. “Location is not the critical factor,” Jesus seems to say. Where the physical body worships is not what you should be worried about. Worshiping in “spirit and truth” should be the focus. Maybe we can find comfort in this during these strange times when we cannot be together. I’ll be the first one to say, I hope we will be filling this sanctuary again very soon - as soon as it is safe to do so, but maybe we take this time to ask ourselves the questions:

* How do I worship?
* Why do I worship?
* How does being in a particular space affect my ability to worship?
* What connections or associations do I have with this space?

Do we worship in Spirit and in truth? Unlike the fishermen who had to be told to drop their nets and follow Jesus, this woman willingly leaves her water jar behind. She doesn’t just leave it behind so she can follow Jesus. She leaves it behind so that she can “go and tell” others about Jesus. She doesn’t have all the answers. In fact, she has very few. Her belief is based on his understanding of her reality and the response he offered when she said that a Messiah was coming. “I am the one!” he said to her. The first time he had spoken those words in John’s gospel.

We are in an unusual time, a time we have never experienced, and hope we will not have to experience again. But as we walk through this time of self-quarantine, of semi-isolation, we can be inspired to work through the “interpretive litter” that surrounds us: the myths, the rumors, the panic, the conspiracy theories. We can choose what to cling to and what to release.

This woman’s story has for far too long been weighted down with the unfair shadow of sexual immorality. Let us shed that litter and set her free to be the apostle of good news that we meet in the text.

We can say “no” to theories that shame all Chinese people or blame political parties for this pandemic. We can sift through the litter that instills fear, discrimination, and distrust. We can allow this woman, this knowledgeable woman, to inspire us to ask wise questions. We can allow this woman, who, when she received good news, did not keep it to herself, but shared it with the world, to remind us to share helpful news, good news, wise news.

But maybe more than anything else, we can look to Jesus, who did not condemn her worship, her faith, while holding his faith, his tradition above hers. Maybe we can acknowledge that none of our ways are perfect, none of us are completely pure in our worship or complete in our theological understandings. We can widen our welcome, so that no one has be alone at the well. We can widen our acceptance and make space for dialogue with those who are different from us. Those who worship differently or vote differently. Those who speak differently or dress differently. The woman learned so much that day because of her willingness to ask questions, and Jesus found a new disciple that day. He knew he would. It wasn’t a surprise to him, but it was quite a surprise to his other disciples. You know the ones – the ones who were still bumbling around and asking him if he wanted a sandwich while he was talking about spiritual food. That was okay, too. He loved them as much as he loved this wise woman. One is not better than the other. Each with their own gifts. Together, a community, all in need of thirst quenching, life redeeming, living water. Amen and Amen.

Sources cited: *Back to the Well: Women’s Encounters with Jesus in the Bible* by Frances Taylor Gench, Westminster John Knox Press.