

# **Talking to Strangers**

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*A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said, to her, “Give me a drink.” (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 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) (John 4:7-9).*

Jesus and his disciples have been in Judea, the southern part of the country around Jerusalem, but now it’s time to head north, back to Galilee, where Jesus grew up. The most direct route to Galilee passes through Samaria, and Jesus takes the shortcut, even though Jews and Samaritans have harbored a low-grade hostility to one another for generations.

Part of the conflict is religious; they worship differently, though they believe in the same God. Part of it is ethnic and political; the Samaritans’ ancestors stayed behind when the Jews were hauled off to Babylon, and Samaritans intermarried with foreigners brought in during the occupation. And part of the conflict is just the conflict itself. Simple bigotry takes over after a while, where people dislike *those* people just because they’re not *our* people. We all know how that goes.

Now it’s high noon, and it’s hot, and Jesus and his young men have been walking all morning. The disciples head into town to buy some food, leaving their leader alone at a well. Pretty soon a Samaritan woman comes along with a jar on her head to draw water from the well, as she does every day. Jesus says, “Give me a drink”—and you can’t quite tell whether it’s a request or a command. There’s a

tone of voice that's right on the edge, especially when people themselves are a little bit edgy.

In any case, the woman does not meekly comply. “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” She gets right to the point. They're only standing a few feet apart, but she sees all sorts of red lines separating her from this foreigner. First, he's a stranger, and everybody knows that strangers might be dangerous. Then again, he's a man, and men aren't supposed to talk to strange women in public. And more than that, he's a Jew; his people and her people just don't get along.

Jesus perks up at what might have seemed like this woman's impertinence, but she sounds interesting, and intelligent. She's come to draw water from the well, but now she draws Jesus in. So he answers, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that says to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked and he would have given you living water.”

“Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep.” The woman's retort states the obvious, but she finds this man interesting too. He's a lot more interesting than the small-town boys she knows; and as a matter of fact, she knows a lot of them. “Where do you get that living water?” she asks, knowing they're not talking about buckets any more. “Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well?”

That was sharp. The woman points out that Samaritans come from Jacob too—Jacob whose name was changed to Israel, the very name by which the Jewish people call themselves. But John, the writer who tells this story, sees irony in her question. John sees irony

everywhere, as people so often fail to recognize how God moves among them. The woman has no idea that the answer to her question is yes, after all. This man she's talking to is in fact infinitely greater than her ancestor Jacob.

Jesus gets the irony too, of course. Now he draws the woman in, as her initial abruptness gives way to more thoughtful conversation. "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing to eternal life." This man is definitely not like the ordinary guys in Samaria. There's something about him, but she can't tell what it is just yet, so she keeps the conversation going, the way people do when they're starting to like someone's company.

The woman says, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Now she's beginning to cross all sorts of boundaries between herself and this stranger—not only boundaries between women and men or Samaritans and Jews, but between banter about trivial things and the substance of things that matter, between initial hostility and genuine encounter with another human being. Still, she keeps a little fence of cynical humor between them. "If you give me this living water, at least I won't have to keep coming here in the heat of the day."

So the connection is made, and Jesus decides to go deeper. "Go, call your husband, and come back," he says. No more small talk now, but Jesus strikes a nerve. "I have no husband," the woman says, and she looks away, as people do when things turn personal, and therefore more vulnerable.

“You’re right in saying you have no husband,” Jesus answers. “You’ve had five husbands, and the one you’re with now is not your husband. You’ve told the truth!” Jesus gives the woman credit, again ironically, for telling the truth, when in fact the little piece of truth she told was by way of concealing the larger story of her life. Jesus has a way of cutting through the half-truths people tell in order to hide the uncomfortable whole truth—which is one reason why lots of people would just as soon avoid Jesus altogether.

Now the Samaritan woman is all in a jumble. This strange man knows way too much about her, and she can’t deny it, so she sputters a little stopgap while she tries to collect herself. “Sir, I see you are a prophet.” Then she does what people usually do when some troubling truth has been uncovered: she changes the subject. Back to religion now, which suddenly seems so much safer. “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews say that the place where people must worship is Jerusalem.”

Jesus responds to her comment about worship, but he says the place people really need to worship is in their own hearts. “Salvation is from the Jews,” he says—which, by the way, is a reminder that even though John’s gospel sometimes refers to “the Jews” in uncomplimentary ways, it’s a lover’s lament; he’s not at all anti-Semitic. “Salvation is from the Jews,” Jesus says, but “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” There’s that focus on truth again. Not the half-truths people tell to cover up the whole truth, but the truth that comes out clearly in the presence of God. God is spirit, and God is truth, and the only way to worship God faithfully is in spirit and in truth.

The woman makes one last attempt to redirect the conversation. “I know that the Messiah is coming, and when

he comes he will proclaim all things to us.” And now Jesus lets the whole truth be known: “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” There comes a time when not even theology or religious beliefs can shield us from a personal encounter with God. So the woman leaves her jar behind and runs into town, telling her people, “Come and see a man who told me all about my life! You don’t suppose he could really be the Messiah, could he?”

Meanwhile, the disciples come back with lunch, and they’re amazed to see Jesus wrapping up a conversation with a woman in public. They urge him to eat, but he says, “I have food to eat that you don’t know about.” With typical comic relief in the gospel, the clueless disciples wonder who brought Jesus a sandwich while they were gone. He tells his metaphorically challenged followers, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.”

You’re going to reap what others have sewn, Jesus says, and to prove the point, the Samaritans invite him to stay for a couple of days while they see for themselves what the woman was talking about. Sure enough, many of them become disciples themselves. They say, “We don’t need the woman’s testimony any more. We’ve heard for ourselves and now we believe that this is truly the Savior of the world.” So the Samaritan woman starts out as stranger, and becomes an accidental evangelist, helping the disciples reach people they might never have been able to reach on their own.

A recurring theme in the gospel is that you never know who a stranger might turn out to be. Jesus himself is a stranger at first, even to those who become his disciples. So Philip meets Jesus, and then he runs to tell Nathaniel, “We’ve found the one that Moses and the prophets wrote

about, Jesus of Nazareth.” But Nathanael famously scoffs, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael thinks he knows all he needs to know about those Nazarenes.

In fact, St. Paul reminds us that we’ve all been strangers to God, separated from God by our sin and self-centeredness. “But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us,” Paul says. God comes looking for us in Christ, even when we’d just as soon keep our distance, if meeting Jesus means we might have to change some things. But the great hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” declares so gratefully, “Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God; he to rescue me from danger interposed his precious blood.”

This theme of meeting strangers and finding reconciliation on the other side of suspicion and hostility runs all through the Bible, so it’s a safe bet that God means for us to examine our own attitudes toward strangers always and everywhere.

Friday was St. Patrick’s Day, and it’s such a popular holiday now that even people who aren’t Irish dress up in green and pretend to be, if only for a day. But a century or so ago in this country, many of our White Anglo-Saxon Protestant forebears were bitterly hostile toward the Irish, calling them dirty, despicable foreigners and claiming that their uncouth ways would threaten our American way of life. Bigotry always looks silly and ugly in retrospect, doesn’t it?

I went to see the new movie version of *Beauty and the Beast* this weekend. It’s well done, and a great story, but I was reminded that it’s about so much more than a pretty



young woman who gets to know a remarkably unhandsome man.

Gaston, the ridiculously good-looking but narcissistic tough guy that most of the women swoon over, wants to marry Belle, but Belle is too smart to fall for superficial things that impress other people. Flattering himself that Belle must surely want him because he's so completely irresistible, Gaston has to get past her father, who is also unimpressed, and the Beast, who turns out to be more than meets the eye. So Gaston whips up the townspeople into a furious rage with stories that are untrue, and he sets out in front of an angry mob chanting "Kill the Beast! Kill the Beast!" In the midst of all this bigotry and hatred, Gaston's sidekick LeFou starts to see things differently, and he says, while the mob is on a rampage, that there is indeed a beast on the loose, but which one is the beast?

It's a poignant question, and one worth asking in every time and place. When hate groups are on the rise; when people flee from desperate situations and the gates of potential shelters lock them out; when money dedicated to talking with strangers and helping them is cut out in order to buy even more weapons to fight them; when people who enjoy all sorts of benefits are content to let others go without the basic things they take for granted—surely some thoughtful people will ask, where is the beast after all?

Jesus sought us when we were strangers, calling us back to worship God in spirit and in truth. And Jesus says, come Judgment Day, he will ask all of us, "When I was hungry or thirsty or naked or sick or a stranger or in prison, did you care for me?" In that day, not even theology or what we claim to be our religion will help us. Only the truth will matter then—the truth of what we did or failed to do.

The gospel tells us that we never know who the stranger in front of us might turn out to be. For all we know, it might turn out to be Jesus himself.