

The Gospel of John
Lesson 8 – John 4
Tradition, Transition, Transformation

This story is about tradition, transition, and transformation.

Tradition: There are four traditions at work in this story. The first is the Samaritan/Jewish tradition. This tradition is that Jews and Samaritans were enemies. Their antagonism grew out of the Samaritans opposing the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple after the Jews return from exile, and the destruction of the Samaritan Temple by the Jews in 110 BCE. The second tradition is that of the Jews believing that the Temple was the only place where God could be appropriately worshipped (though by the time of the writing of the Gospel of John the Temple had been destroyed). The third tradition was the male/female tradition in which women were second class citizens who were not to be taught, or in some Pharisaic traditions, even spoken to. The fourth tradition was the Jewish/Roman tradition in which the Romans were seen as oppressors and the enemy. In some ways these four traditions are all examples of the world seen as being composed of outsiders and insiders. The upshot of all these traditions is that people on each side understood themselves to be better than the people on the other side (except perhaps women who were not seen as equal in any of those groups).

Transition: the transition in this story centers around Jesus upending all four of these traditions. It transitions the work of the church from being a community centered on rigid structures of who is in and who is out, to a community in which all are welcome. This can be seen first in Jesus offering the good news of his mission and ministry to the Samaritans (outsiders and enemies to Israel) via the woman at the well. This is transition because the assumption had always been that the messiah was only for the Jews. By Jesus speaking to the woman at the well he expands the understanding of the love of God to all people. The second transition comes in that Jesus says that people will no longer need a Temple, whether the Temple in Jerusalem or the long destroyed Temple of the Samaritans, to worship God. This eliminates the tradition of the Temple in Jerusalem being the sole dwelling place of God. The third transition is the relationship between men and women. Again, by speaking with a woman (which would have made Jesus ritually unclean) and offering her salvation, Jesus makes it clear that God's love is equally offered to all genders. The final transition is that even Gentiles can believe and are welcome in God's kingdom.

Transformation: the transformation in this story comes in four ways. First, there is the personal transformation of the woman at the well. She goes from being an outsider to her own people and to the Jews, to being an insider with Jesus. Second, there is the transformation of the disciples. They are astonished that Jesus would be speaking with a woman, much less a Samaritan woman. The assumption is that their understanding of the place of women has been altered by this event. The third transformation is of the Samaritans in the village. They move from being outsiders (to God's Promise) to insiders because they believed in Jesus' word. In addition, they become insiders because of what they have heard from Jesus and not from the woman...her testimony led them to listen and decide on their own. Finally the Roman and his whole household believe in Jesus, thus showing that transformation is possible for all persons/nations.

Summary: In a sense the summary is found in verses 31-38, when Jesus says he has come to complete his father's work. What he means is that he is completing the work of blessing all people, of all nations, and of all genders by inviting them into the Kingdom. A task to which the disciples are now invited.

Questions:

1. What traditions do we have that we might need to revisit?
2. How do you, if you do, see yourself in transition in your faith journey?
3. How has your faith transformed you?