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Your Point of View

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In the book *The Magician's Nephew*, one of the seven in his *Chronicles of Narnia*, C.S. Lewis wrote: "What you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing: it also depends on what sort of person you are." In the book, the line is meant to describe how children from London (in our world) saw beauty and wonder when the great Lion Aslan sang the world of Narnia into being, and how one child's selfish uncle saw fear and the need to conquer in the same event. Yet that one sentence has a truth that can easily apply to many situations outside of Lewis' Narnia books, including today's Gospel.

I know the section we heard from John's Gospel today is long; it was long because it is the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone in John's Gospel, which is worth noticing, because John's Gospel has Jesus given to long, teachy monologues, and the people who gave us the lectionary did not want to leave out any part of this extraordinary conversation. Perhaps those lectionary planners didn't want us to miss that this isn't just a long conversation, it is a remarkable one, where we might see Jesus has met his conversational match; someone who can listen as well as contribute to a meaningful conversation with him.

But what you see in this conversation and the two people engaged in it might have a lot to do with where you are standing, what sort of person you are and what you have heard or read about Jesus' conversation partner. Commentaries new and old are chuck full of pages about the woman at the well and attempt to determine what sort of person she was. A woman who is never named, a person whose identity is based on her gender, her religion, nationality, and her marital status. None of these identity markers have been interpreted in a positive light, but could help shed light on the ones giving the interpretations.

Starting with commentators from the early days of the Church like St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine who saw the woman as a bold missionary, if a little on the unintelligent side. Because women weren't usually included in the deeper theological discussions of their time, early commentators saw Jesus as the patient teacher who kept correcting the woman who seemed to miss what Jesus was saying, and while it seemed she didn't ever quite get it, she eventually

understood enough to share the emerging faith within her and helped to bring many other Samaritans to Christ. This view certainly reflects how the church at the time was conveying the message that faith, even faith that lacked full understanding, could still participate in the mission of sharing the Good News of Jesus and bring others to know Jesus themselves.

Whether the woman was unintelligent or not seems to be a matter of opinion, as other commentators saw not only intelligence, but a conniving, manipulative one in her. In the sixteenth century, Protestant Reformers saw this woman as saucy, brash, interrupting, and ridiculing Jesus. A few even accused her of trying to seduce him. All the reform commentators admire the woman's zeal for spreading the Gospel after her encounter with Jesus because of their love for the redeemed sinner, and to them this woman was a prime example. Even though Jesus never used the word sin, nor did he admonish the woman to change any sinful behavior, it was the reformers who paid special attention to the number of husbands this woman had and since then many Christians have not been able to forget the titillating detail that this woman had 5 husbands and appeared to be living in sin. How that woman ended up in the situation she was in has been the subject of a great deal of study and conjecture mostly at the woman's expense. A few suggest perhaps the woman is a tragic victim of a male dominated society where her husbands could have discarded her for any reason, or perhaps they had died. Many have imagined illicit affairs, infidelity, perhaps because they weren't able to imagine any other possibility for a woman. These scholars point out a woman didn't go to a well to get water at the noon of the day, but in the morning when the air was cooler, so the time of day was further evidence of the woman's sin, as she was either avoiding moral women or was not welcomed by them.

A few modern commentators point out noon is the time of day is when it is brightest, and the time of day could be meant to remind readers of Nicodemus who came to Jesus in the dark of the night, and didn't seem to understand him. These scholars point out this woman came to Jesus during daylight, a sign that she will be enlightened, as she recognized Jesus was the Messiah before his disciples did in John's Gospel.

A few modern commentators suggest this woman never existed and this conversation never happened, as this story is a metaphor for the way the Christian community John's Gospel originated in welcomed Samaritans and other

outsiders into their community and that they accepted women as leaders. This interpretation might make sense, but many struggle to accept it, perhaps because they don't want to.

Personally, I am grateful for the many ways those who have gone before me and those engaged in the faith with me now have and continue to interpret this part of John's Gospel. Each view shows us a bit of where the Church has been by how each commentator has seen Jesus and the woman engaged in this conversation at the well. It is a conversation that has stood with us as a Church and as a people of faith, and that means it most certainly has as much to say to us who now stand in another interesting time for the church, our community, and the world.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity today's Gospel has for us is to consider not what we see in it, but what Jesus and the woman saw in each other. After all, it is the season of Lent, a time when we are reminded God is reaching out to us, still eager to meet us even in unexpected places like grocery stores, wells, restaurants, banks, and other places we go for our daily needs. Perhaps when we only focus on the woman, we too easily slip into the temptation to judge her, to make her fit what we want or need to see, to take some pressure off ourselves for a while, or to relax in a happy ending, and miss the One waiting for us to engage in a conversation that might take a long time, or just a moment, but can be a holy encounter.

Notice Jesus started it. He started the conversation by noticing the woman, seeing her and her empty water jug, naming his thirst, and his need for water. The woman didn't see just a man. She saw a Jewish man, and named he really shouldn't be talking to her, let alone asking to drink from her jar. That's when Jesus went deeper into the conversation by naming her situation, which she didn't seem to respond to by being ashamed, she responded by seeing Jesus even more clearly, as a prophet. Her perspective of him changed, and so did their conversation, it went deeper when she asked him what some commentators said was one of the most important questions of the day: the question of the correct place to worship. Jesus did not belittle or dismiss her question, he answered it by talking about the new thing God was up to: bringing people together to worship not a place, but God who is more than a location. That is what led the woman to see Jesus for who he is: the Messiah. Her recognition of that caused a change in her symbolized by her leaving her empty water jar, just as Jesus' disciples had left their nets and followed him. I have to admit that forgotten water jar is one of my

favorite parts of this story. It isn't just a symbol of a calling answered, it can be an invitation to bring ourselves to Jesus, our whole selves, the good parts – the joys and celebrations, along with the hurting, lonely, frightened, and aching parts, and most importantly, to bring our questions, our doubts, and not just leave them with Jesus, but engage, by bringing our listening selves and listen as well as contribute to a conversation. It might not look like a conversation by the side of a well in the light of day, and it doesn't have to. It can happen through study, spiritual direction, participating in a ministry you haven't before, there are lots of ways, some you might not have imagined yet.

The empty water jar can also be a summary of that conversation; a conversation that started with a need for water, both by the woman and Jesus, and how seeing each other for who they are made it possible for Jesus and the woman to go deeper into their conversation, by listening to and responding to one another, so that at the end of the conversation they didn't need a drink of water, because they found a different kind of refreshment. Refreshment that drove the woman into town where she initiated conversation with a statement and a question, inviting the people from her community to come and see what she had experienced. Refreshment that seemed to be just what Jesus needed, when he told his disciples there was something more important than food, there was the work of God happening in their midst.

The conversation that started with two unlikely people talking to each other and ended with an energizing and refreshing experience of the Holy for both Jesus and the woman at the well. What we see and hear in that conversation might be an indicator of where we are, we might see and hear the reminder that conversations have value, we might see and hear that God is yearning to engage with each of us and might be hanging out in the most usual of places to meet us, we might see and hear the reminder that any one of us can be more than we seem, and it is worth getting to know someone before judging them, we might see and hear the value of listening to each other, as Jesus and the woman listened, we might even see and hear a calling to engage our community in ministry. Perhaps each of us saw and heard something a little different, because we might be in slightly different places, and that is okay. Because perhaps when we each share what we see and hear, and listen to what we all see and hear, we can use all our perspectives to work together to recognize and share Christ with our neighbors, our communities, our workplaces, our schools, and all the unexpected places he could already be waiting.