

The Woman at the Well of Story

John 4: 5-24

Edie Innis was a young mother in Scotland, the wife of a farm laborer, when the potato famine struck in the late 1840s. You heard me right—in Scotland, not Ireland—because the potato famine hit there as well, though it's less well-known. The Presbyterian church raised money to help feed those hardest hit and so it wasn't as devastating as in Ireland. But when the potato famine went on too long, they made the laborers crush rocks to build roads in exchange for the “charity.” It was back-breaking work.

So, when the Hudson's Bay Company came looking for indentured servants to work on a farm near Fort Victoria on Vancouver's Island, Edie's husband John jumped at the chance. The deal was he would work for no pay for five years at the end of which he would receive ten acres of his own land. Edie wasn't so happy to leave her family and friends and everything she knew to move to the other side of the world, but she had no choice.

They left Scotland with their three small children in August 1852 on a ship called the Norman Morrison, travelled across the Atlantic Ocean, around the treacherous Cape Horn at the tip of South America and up the Pacific Coast, a voyage of almost five months. After three days of stormy weather, they finally entered the Strait of Juan da Fuca in January 1853.

At the entrance to the harbour there was a little island called Dead Man's Island, with four great wooden statues of the Indian chiefs whose bodies lay rotting on the island. The sight brought to Edie's mind all the lurid stories she had heard growing up about what the Indians did to the white settlers in this New World, and she was terrified. It didn't help when the steamer entered the harbour and she saw the live Indians in their canoes and in their ramshackle dwellings huddled around the outer walls of the Fort. They were different—they looked different, dressed different, even smelled different—and Edie was afraid of them. In the next few years, she avoided them as much as she could and she forbade her children to play with their children.

You have something in common with Edie. Ten years after their arrival, in 1863, Edie's family moved from the farm into town, and she attended the First Presbyterian Church on the corner of Pandora and Blanshard, the church that would eventually become this church, First Metropolitan United.

We have something else in common with her as well. Like Edie, the stories we heard growing up have shaped the way we see the world in ways we don't even realize. Stories are important. That's why we need to re-examine our old stories from time to time, to see them in a new light. Imagine if Edie had heard the story of the settlement of North America from an indigenous perspective. She would have known that the “Indians” had much more to fear from her than she did from them. Imagine if she had heard the story of how the Coast Salish people had welcomed

the Hudson's Bay traders and even helped them build Fort Victoria because they hoped it would protect them from raiding tribes from the north.

Just like Edie, we have had generation after generation of stories from the settlers' point of view-- in our novels, text books, and especially in our movies and TV programs. And it is only now in this 21st century that we are beginning to hear stories from an indigenous point of view. We need to start reading those stories, and fortunately, our First-Met library has an excellent collection of new indigenous writing. There's even one mentioned in this week's bulletin. I recommend that you check it out.

Yes, it's important that we examine our stories from a different perspective from time to time. This is true also of the story in the Scripture reading this morning of the Samaritan woman at the well. When I was growing up, the way this story was explained to me —and no doubt the way Edie learned it too—was that the Samaritan woman was a great sinner, an adulterer. She had had five husbands and she was living with a man she wasn't even married to. What a scandal! No wonder she had to go to the well at noon. Decent women didn't want to be seen with her.

Let's look at it through another lens.

Some years ago, I taught English as a Second Language. Once, after class, I was talking to one of my students about this very story of the woman at the well. He was a Coptic Christian from Ethiopia, and he was telling me the way that they saw this same story, and it was very different from the way that we in the West interpret it. I took what he said to heart because he came from a culture that was much closer to the culture of the New Testament Bible. So, what did he tell me about this story?

Women of that culture and especially at that time needed a husband in order to survive. A husband could cast off a wife easily, especially if she didn't produce a child for him. The poor Samaritan woman was probably barren through no fault of her own. So, every husband had cast her off and she could no longer find a man who would marry her, but she still needed a man in order to survive. So, yes, she was an adulterer. Yes, she was an outcast. Yes, she had to go to the well at noon when no one else was about, but it was the society in which she lived that made her an outcast, not her personal sin.

And going back to the story with this framework in mind, what Jesus says to her starts to make more sense. He doesn't condemn her for her sins. He doesn't say, "Woman, you are an adulterer. You need to repent of your sins now or you will go to Hell." NO. He simply tells her the facts of her situation. And she responds by saying, "Sir, I see you are a prophet." And then they have a discussion, not about her sinful life but about their differences, about the right place to worship God. The Samaritans believed they should worship God on the mountain. The Jews believed they should worship God in the temple. At the end of this discussion, Jesus says "It's not important where you worship God because God is a spirit and should be worshiped in spirit and in truth."

One could almost say he was spiritual and not religious.

Especially when you look at how Jesus broke the rules of his religion. The Jews were very strict about who you could talk to and who you could associate with, and the Samaritans were on the taboo list. Though Jews and Samaritans had a common ancestor in Jacob and worshipped the same God, they “othered” each other. Sometimes the worst hatreds grow out of the closest “strangers”—think Serbs and Croats in former Yugoslavia, Tutsis and Hutus in Ruanda, and Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. From the outside, we cannot even see their differences, and yet their animosity runs so deep it has led to war and genocide in our lifetime.

So, when Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well, he was breaking a deep religious and cultural taboo. But by doing so, he showed us the way to turn the stranger into the friend. It’s easy, and yet it’s difficult too. You speak with one another, you share your stories, you listen to each other, you discuss your differences, and you discover your common humanity.

For those of you who were here last week, you’re probably thinking this sounds a lot like Rev. Shelagh’s message. Only she used the story of Paul talking to Lydia the seller of purple. But the message was the same—we should talk to the stranger. And for those of you who were here last week, how many of you did your homework? Come on—Hands up. Be honest. For those of you who weren’t here, Shelagh asked everyone to show a little kindness to strangers last week—to pay it forward, as it were. She made several suggestions like giving the cashier at McDonalds a loony to pay for the next person’s coffee. Or being friendly to people in the checkout line at the grocery store. For those of you who didn’t do your homework and those of you who weren’t here, that’s okay. I’m giving you another chance to do it this week. This is my assignment:

Be like Jesus. Go and talk to that strange woman at the well. The outcast. The one your mother told you not to talk to. Yes, her.

So, why did Jesus talk to the Samaritan woman? Jesus had a vision of something he called “the kingdom of God.” In this kingdom, there are no outcasts, no strangers; all are welcome here. We are one community, one family. We are all the children of God and loved by God. All are welcome to come together at the well and drink its living water, and those who drink its water will never be thirsty again.

What does this mean to you? It meant a great deal to the Samaritan woman because she immediately went back to her village and told everyone the story of her encounter with the prophet at the well.

So where do we find this magical kingdom? I don’t think it’s in some future place that we are striving for. I don’t think it’s some place we go after we die. It’s here and it’s now. In this time and place. And how do we find it? Perhaps the first step is like the song says:

“Draw the circle wide, draw it wider still,
Let this be our song
No one stands alone, standing side by side,
Draw the circle wide.”

May this truly be our song. Amen.

Blessing

Full disclosure—Edie Innis is one of the characters in my new novel *Crossing Bridges*, which God willing will be published early in 2020. The novel takes place here in Victoria (from 1852 to 1898) and tells the story of three generations of women—Edie, her daughter Lucy and her granddaughter Maggie. So, though she lived 150 years ago, she is not actually born yet, except in my imagination.

The Samaritan woman may or may not have been a real person too. We don't even know her name. There are far too many unnamed women in the Bible. But one good thing about that is it makes it easier to put ourselves into the story.

How are you like the Samaritan woman?

What would you say to Jesus if you met him?

How do you worship God?

Where do you find eternal life?

And don't forget, you have some homework to do and this is it:

Go and share your story with a stranger.

Don't be afraid. God is with you.

Amen