

January 30, 2022

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

John 4:1-42

“Things are not what they seem”

1. I recently watched a movie which is really a story inside a story
 - a. The movie is called “Being the Ricardos” and it is based on the real-life story of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz
 - b. They were actors in the 1950s and were married in real life, and they played a married couple on the famous TV show “I Love Lucy”
 - c. The movie follows the couple during a very traumatic week in their real life, and all the while we witness them preparing for the live performance of an episode of their TV series.
 - d. The mingling of the stories (of the real-life drama and of the fictional TV show) weaves in and out of the movie.
 - e. It is clear enough when you’re watching “real life” or “TV life”, but you do begin to wonder how much the show bleeds into their real life, and how much their real lives impact the interaction of the fictional characters on the small screen.
 - f. And you also get a peek at the systems which give context to the movie and TV industries, such as a diminished view of women, a paternalistic view of immigrants, and a clear view that money interests are the ones really pulling the levers of power (be it the tobacco company executives from the title sponsor of I Love Lucy, or the Hollywood studios executives)
2. The meeting at Jacob’s well which we read about in our passage today has a story inside a story inside a story
 - a. It’s important to consider the location of the narrative, because it has a lot of history – common history and disputed history
 - i. We hear it being called “Jacob’s well”
 1. Though there is some uncertainty archeologically about where that original well is/was, in the story it is presented as THE well, so it would mean that this was the place where Jacob met Rachel, whom he eventually married
 2. That is to say: it is a deeply important part in the biblical narrative
 - ii. But there is a story inside that story, because the well then also represents the theological split following the split of the two kingdoms (Israel and Judah)
 1. Consider that what once was one kingdom was split, and the Northern realm (Israel – where this well sat) was alienated from the Southern realm (Judah – where Jerusalem is)
 2. So, in their conversation, when you hear about where should people worship, that well is kind of a reminder of the sticking point – worship in Jerusalem, or worship “on this mountain” here in Samaria
 3. It is a story of who has the “right” answer, and the power.
 - iii. Then notice that the woman speaks of “Our Father Jacob”
 1. Again, back to the story inside a story

2. I don't think she was saying "our" to mean "at least we agree on this common ancestor" but rather she was taking ownership over and away from the Judeans (southern kingdom) – we are the originals, and in fact, here is Jacob's well, in OUR backyard, not yours.
- iv. Parenthesis: The traditional site of the well is today in what is the Occupied West Bank, Palestine, thus highlighting in a modern context two people claiming "Father Jacob" – Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and Israelis in Israel
 1. There we sense the power struggle, the politics of conquest, and Israeli efforts to erase an entire history of Palestinians for the sake of controlling the narrative.
- b. Today's story then is set already as a contentious moment which has all the elements for it not to turn out nicely
 - i. We have the generationally contentious distrust between Samaritans and Judeans/Jews
 - ii. And culturally, the barrier for interaction between a man and a woman who are strangers (which is why the disciples are simply shocked he was speaking to a woman, let alone a Samaritan woman)
- c. What is remarkable as we read the story is that things are not what they seem in this dialogue
 - i. Unlike the conversation with Nicodemus earlier, this conversation between Jesus and the woman might look like misunderstandings, but in fact they're very much on point
 - ii. The woman is defensive of her people, proud, not giving an inch to Jesus
 - iii. Jesus is going head to head with her, giving spiritual wisdom, to answer her questions and concerns
 - iv. And it is when he gets personal, that we realize how knowledgeable and wise she is
 1. Again, another story within a story, as a commentator suggests (Coloe)
 2. There is another layer in this dialogue, with the list of husbands meaning how the people of Samaria, from Jesus' perspective, had wandered from their true spouse (God), and it was now time to get on the right path (again, remember this is the spot where Jacob and Rachel meet –eventually to marry!)
- d. And then there is the plot twist in the story
 - i. The woman, who knows her scriptures, says; I know the Messiah is coming
 - ii. Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah to her: he hadn't done that before to anyone else!
 - iii. That's how impressive this woman is, and how important the passage
 - iv. Maybe you've heard interpretations of this story as of a woman who was ashamed of herself, with a checkered past (why else come in the heat of midday to get water?), someone to be "saved" – but put those to the side!
 1. She's a conversation partner with Jesus. Jesus sees her and rewards her faithfulness in a unique way: telling her WHO HE IS!

2. What's more, she becomes the proclaimer to the community, and she's effective! They trusted her! They believed in Jesus because of her statements!
 3. And then she returns to the well with the entire community, again remember: of ENEMIES, and they not only believe, but ask Jesus to stay with them, and he stays for two days.
 4. This isn't just a story of hospitality, but it is within a systemic-wide story of being in relationship with God, of all people being equals in God's eyes
3. These days we are talking as a congregation about systemic change in our community, and in order to make progress, we would benefit from thinking about examples of our present reality as fitting like stories inside stories
 - a. As part of our Matthew 25 initiative, our congregation is focusing on dismantling structural racism and eradicating systemic poverty
 - b. As I have reflected with you before, it is difficult to wrap our heads around systems
 - c. I've suggested that we're good at those conversations zoomed in at the individual level of representations of racism and poverty, and that we can work to then zoom out to see the source of the personal impact in structural racism and systemic poverty
 - d. Today, the Samaritan woman and Jesus helped us look at the systems in their day as concentric circles of embedded stories, not just about a well, but about an identity as a people of God, not only about where to offer sacrifices to God, but about blowing apart the idea that we can claim God is ours exclusively.
 - e. You and I live within systems in place older than all of us combined which offer an overarching story to the day-to-day stories we live, and some of us want to talk about the injustice in those old systems, and some of us don't
 - i. Heritage Fund, where I am a board member, has been reflecting a great deal about Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the past 18 months.
 - ii. So has Hanover College, where I am a trustee, where I co-chair the Equity and Inclusion committee (a brand-new committee of the board).
 - iii. Here in our church we're partnering with Fairlawn, First Pres Bloomington and North Christian churches to be honest about what it would mean to dismantle structural racism and eradicate systemic poverty.
 - iv. All the while there are state politicians in Indy trying to prevent public schools from honest conversations about the painful parts of the history of our country.
 - v. There as stories inside stories inside stories.
 - f. You and I are in this journey together because you and I have been called by God to be in it. That's a story.
 - i. We're inside a larger story of a faith community and a faith tradition which follows Jesus, who was able to address the personal and the systemic to lead to justice. That's a story.
 - ii. And that's inside a story of a nation which is trying to open the script of the play called "the American dream" -- a land with liberty and justice for all, only to realize
 1. the parts of all the actors who got no lines but carry the biggest load,

2. who make the story possible yet don't get the chance to be on the spotlight,
 - a. be it the slaves who once built this nation (it wasn't the slave owners who built it) and their descendants who for centuries have been treated as less than human,
 - b. be it the people with no power or money who get manipulated or worked to the bone by those with power and money,
 - c. be it the women, or the people of color who couldn't vote until relatively recently,
 - d. or the invisible undocumented people who work harder than any of us ever will so that others will have nice lawns, cheap produce.
4. Listen to what the disciples asked "why is he talking to a woman?" They could not see the story inside the story inside the story. And so they couldn't understand. If like the disciples we fail to see the complexity of all these embedded stories, it'll be like leaving a movie theater confused, maybe even upset, thinking: that was boring and pointless show, and miss out on a life-transforming moment it was inviting us to.

Wisdom Commentary. John 1-10. Mary L. Coloe. Series editor Barbara E. Reid. OP. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press. 2021. P.109-125

<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Jacobs-Well>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob%27s_Well