

From John's gospel: The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

You don't look like anyone I know. That is the name of a book by Heather Sellers. It is a memoir about a woman with a disorder called "Face Blindness." From early on in life, she hasn't recognized people the way that most of us do, by how they look. She doesn't recognize faces at all.

She tells stories about how her mother would pick her up from school, but having changed clothes, Heather walked by, not knowing her own mother. Heather never knew she had a substitute teacher in school until they started talking. She once introduced herself to her boyfriend at a party because he had taken off his sweater. She made her husband wear a white tuxedo at their wedding, not because it looked good, but because she couldn't risk him being dressed like a groomsman! She doesn't watch movies because the characters change clothes and she doesn't know which character is which. She earned a PhD, but cannot recognize pictures of her own family.

All of this has left her finding other ways of recognizing

people in life. The white tuxedo, the sweater at parties were her only hope, because she couldn't rely on what you and I see every day. And her story fascinates me, and today I want to understand it as a spiritual exercise. It is the third Sunday of Lent and we are far enough into the journey to stop and take a look around. What did you promise yourself and God a few short weeks ago? With this story of face blindness in mind, ask yourself if we see things the way that they really are or just as we perceive them to be. What are the things to which we are blind that we ought to understand, and what are the things that we need to perceive differently?

In the fourth chapter of John's gospel, we have a story that challenges conventional assumptions and asks us to see differently. It is both a story of a kind of Face Blindness and an exercise in the opposite of Face blindness, whatever we might call that, as Jesus recognizes in a woman more than she sees in herself. Jesus is traveling toward home, but he does the one thing that most pious Jews would not have done. He travels through the heart of Samaria. If you grew up in a place that had a bad part

of town, a place you shouldn't go for whatever reason, you can relate. Samaria was an area, a region between Jerusalem and Nazareth, and for Jews in Jesus' day, it was the place parents taught their children not to go.

Samaritans were a branch of Jews, but they had married outside the faith for generations and interpreted the Law of Moses differently, which meant that pious Jews didn't recognize them as being Jewish. The Samaritans believed that they were still Jews, of course, because they were descendants of Abraham and they followed the Law of Moses, but that was part of the problem. The Samaritans also said that their Temple was the real place to worship God, not the Temple in Jerusalem, which had become fighting words. All of this was why Jews and Samaritans hated each other. It may sound silly, like most prejudices usually do, but to them it was seditious and serious. Jews traveled far out into the hinterlands to avoid seeing these people and their mixed-up values and nefarious places of worship and sinful traditions. They didn't need to see the face. These people didn't look like anyone they knew.

John doesn't tell us why Jesus travels into the heart of Samaria. Maybe because Jesus thought that these long-standing prejudices were silly; maybe he knew that God loved them equally, and it was only they who had created the differences; maybe he was just tired of walking; or he knew that it was time to bring some hope to the bad part of town. All we know is that Jesus chose not to avoid Samaria but walked right into it.

It is there that Jesus spoke to the woman at the well. She, too, wondered why. That is the first thing she says, "how is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" For the reasons that we have named, Jews and Samaritans did not usually speak to each other, though I suspect there was more to her question. It wasn't only about Jews and Samaritans. It was improper for a man to speak to a woman he didn't know, at least if his intentions were honest. And the real offense was worse yet. Women were property. If he wanted water, using someone else's property without asking the rightful owner was like needing a ride and asking a teenager babysitting for someone else to drive you, and also to

shovel your snow. She asked a good question. He had crossed a lot of boundaries in his first question to her.

But of course there is more to this question. Why is it that he asked her for a drink? John's Gospel plays around with this question in grand style so that you and I rightly wonder why, even as the story is being told. There is the misunderstanding of living water, she trying to figure out who he is, and he of course figuring out the truth of who she is. John's gospel loves conversations like these. For John, I think, the conversation alone was worth asking the question.

The answer to this question in the life of the church has often been different. For many, she is a sinful woman; Jesus recognized that about her immediately, and that is why he asked her for a drink. Perhaps, we could say, he saw it in her face. Many theologians, many people, quickly become fixated on how many times she had been married. Part of that is fair. She has had quite a life! Not only was she a Samaritan, which made her sinful in the eyes of Jesus, but here was a woman who was married

five times and living with another man. That's why she was drawing water at noon. Nobody draws water at noon, but in the morning and evening when it isn't hot. This was a woman who drew water when nobody else was there because of her own shame. That was why he broke with custom and spoke to her, because he recognized all that was wrong with her.

I do think that he spoke to her because he saw that there was something wrong with her, but I don't think that it is because he recognized her as a sinner. It occurs to me, in this story familiar to most of us, we remember that this woman is property and an outcast up until the talk of all the husbands, and then we seem to lose our bearings. We change from seeing this as a narrative of Jesus reaching out to someone in need, to a narrative of him meeting a sinner, when the text never suggests that. You see, none of this was her fault. It couldn't have been her fault. She couldn't have divorced any of them. She didn't have that right or ability legally. They must have died or divorced her. Perhaps she couldn't conceive, or maybe there was something else about her that made her universally

undesirable. But with each death or divorce, her worth—literal and figurative—deminished. Now, she couldn't even get a man to own her. That's what she told Jesus. This last one wasn't even a husband; he was someone who kept her around if she would draw water for them.

Look at the text. Jesus never tells her to repent; he never tells her to go away and sin no more; no, he tells her that he knows everything about her—the husbands and the man who hasn't married her, and why she has to come and draw water at noon—and with that, I suppose, Jesus answers her question, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" He didn't see her as a woman of Samaria, as a miserable woman who had become used goods. He saw how she had been: hurt and thrown away and used. And he saw her for who she really was, a beloved child of God who had long since ceased recognizing herself that way, and that is why I think he asked her for a drink.

The woman I came across who suffered her whole life from Face Blindness said this: "This condition that has

isolated me my whole life has [also] become something that helps me to understand other people and to help them understand me in ways most people could never imagine." In her book, she describes how she has had to try her whole life to notice what others never see. People are amazed at things she notices about them. Sometimes her Face Blindness seems like a disease that keeps her from seeing what is obvious to the rest of us. Sometimes, though, it causes her to see what the rest of us miss.

There was one last reason Jesus must have asked the Samaritan woman for a drink. He didn't go into town to search out the religious leaders as he does elsewhere. They probably would have discounted him because he was a Jew, and that would have kept them blind to his message. But that wasn't true of her. Her brokenness also made her willing to listen to him. We should remember that about our own brokenness, how sometimes it makes us ripe to be used by God. John's gospel celebrates her as the only Samaritan able to see Jesus for who he really was. It tells us how this faceless woman became the first to bring Samaritans the good news of living water. She

saw in him the spiritual face of God that frees us to see and love others as God sees and loves us, and she went. Jesus didn't even ask her to go!

Though we never hear of her again, I suspect Samaritans never forgot her. Every day she was there at Jacob's well. She had long since quit drawing water at noon. She was there morning and evening with all of them—to remind them of the living water she received that day that Jesus saw her for who she was. That was the takeaway. Every ounce of water that came out of that ancient well now pointed them to the new and unending life that Jesus promised. And I suspect her story challenged them to wonder how they had seen her all wrong so many years, as it ought to challenge us, to wonder what we have been seeing wrong. A curiosity and longing to encounter and know God, a willingness to explore our own interior selves, a desire to leave the world in some small way better for our having been in it: I suspect those became the things that people recognized in her.

Why was it that Jesus, a Jew, asked a woman of Samaria

for a drink? Perhaps it was because so few things in life had gone her way; perhaps he knew that her brokenness would open her to see what others missed; perhaps it was because he recognized her differently... she didn't look like anyone he had known!... and he saw that all of this, all of this made her ripe to become the first Apostle to the Samaritans.