

Beyond the “Single Story”
Sermon by Vicar Katherine Chatelaine-Samsen
Lent 3A
John 4:5-42
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Throughout Lent, we’re engaging the theme of listening. Now, I like to think that I’m a really good listener. But let me tell you about a time when I was a really bad listener.

At my last job, I had the opportunity to serve as a mentor for a young woman in a fellowship program at my organization. I was really excited to impart my wisdom and knowledge of the working world to this young, impressionable program fellow who was just entering the workforce. We sat down for our first meeting to set some goals for the year as mentor/mentee and I started asking questions about what kinds of skills she wanted to learn, who she wanted to be introduced to, what questions she had about having a fulltime job for the first time. I listened for key words that confirmed my own expectations of what she, as a member of this fellowship program, would want to know. Toward the end of our conversation, she very quietly said that she was excited about everything we had talked about, but was actually quite comfortable already with some of the goals I had suggested. As it turned out, she had already worked in several different places and was coming to the fellowship program with more experience than I had been led to believe through my own thoughts about what the average fellow looked like. She had alluded to this in our conversation, but I was so intent on listening for the parts of her story that confirmed my own fabricated story of her that I completely missed the story that she was trying to tell.

The problem was that I had heard one story, which prevented me from listening to many.

This is a common occurrence. Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls this the danger of the single story. It’s when we let one story we have heard over and over again about a person or group of people define who they are. These stories are often told by people in power about people who are not. The people in power decide how they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, and how many stories are told. She gives an example of her family’s serving boy, Fide. All she heard from her mother about Fide was that he was poor, and this story was reinforced over and over again by her mother sending Fide home every evening with food for his family.

One evening, Chimamanda accompanied Fide home and was startled to discover that his family's home was filled with colorful baskets that his family had woven. Fide's family was not only poor, but they were industrious and artistic. The one story she had heard about him made him flat and incomplete in her eyes.

This way of looking at the world through a single story surrounds us. In many ways, it's kind of how our brains work. The single stories help us categorize and process all of the information we take in on a daily basis, making our lives a little less overwhelming. We can assume, for example, that because someone lives in Washington, DC, they have some sort of global or civic consciousness. And nine times out of ten, you're probably right. This serves as a way to reinforce that single story. It at least helps with conversation at a networking event!

The problem is when we let the single story become a stereotype that defines all people of a certain group in the same way. It may affect how we look at someone who is from another country, or even someone who lives in a different part of our own country. It may lead to prejudice against people of a particular race, gender, or class. Letting one story define a person or an entire group of people puts up walls, which dramatically challenge our ability to listen to them. Simply hearing the one story about a person or group of people can limit our ability to listen to other stories of who they really are. The one story can prevent us from listening to the many stories that are out there.

We run into the single story problem in today's Gospel. There's a single story here about race, gender, and religion. We hear it straight off the bat in the opening dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. "Why are you, a Jew, asking for something from me, a woman of Samaria?" She knows the story that Jews, especially Jewish men, do not share things with Samaritans, and this story is affirmed by the Gospel writer in his aside. Samaritans practiced a different religion from the Jews, one that many Jews considered to be the "wrong" religion because of possible idolatry and the incorrect place of worship. They were enemies of one another. This single story of Jewish-Samaritan relations that ungirds the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman immediately has implications for how they should interact with one another. Jesus should not speak with the Samaritan woman or accept anything from her because it would make him unclean. The Samaritan woman should be deferential to him, a man, giving him the water he asks for and then leaving.

Yet, this is not what happens. Instead, we get a deep conversation in which both Jesus and the Samaritan woman ask for and then give something to the other. Jesus begins the exchange by making himself vulnerable – he needs water and doesn't have a bucket, so he asks the Samaritan woman to help him out, placing her in a position of power. This act of vulnerability opens the door to an extended conversation in which both Jesus and the Samaritan woman engage one another as equals. They disagree, they have misunderstandings, they don't fully get one another. But they listen to one another. Jesus listens to the Samaritan woman's story and discovers that she thirsts for living water. The Samaritan woman listens to Jesus and discovers that he is the Messiah that she's looking for. Jesus crosses the boundaries of race, gender, and religion – the boundaries set up by the single story of Jews and Samaritans – to authentically engage and listen to the Samaritan woman. Through this, he and the Samaritan woman break open the single story by listening to the many stories they each have to offer one another.

And community is built when a single story is broken open. The Samaritan woman was so enraptured by what she learned about Jesus that she left her water pitcher at the well and hurried back to her Samaritan community to tell them about this Messiah she had just met. She had heard a new story about a Jewish man that she needed to share with others in her community. The Samaritan woman became an evangelist with a new story to tell about someone from a group of people who were considered to be an enemy. And the members of her community received the story with joy and welcomed Jesus and his disciples into their midst. A new community was created that crossed racial and religious divides by letting go of the one story to receive the many. They all could receive the living water that Jesus offered.

But how do we have these encounters where we can discover that there is more beyond the “one story” we have heard about a group of people? Especially if our lives run in an orbit where, for the most part, these stories are confirmed over and over again by the media, our families or colleagues, our friends? How do we have an encounter like the one at the well? I think personal memoir can break us out of our carefully constructed worlds. Or at least, that's what I've experienced recently.

A single story that we heard throughout the summer and fall last year was about white, working-class voters living in the rust belt. This demographic was mobilized to come out and vote for Donald Trump in numbers that had never really been seen before from this demographic. The story the media told was that they were an angry, unemployed group that saw Trump as a political savior, even though many of his policies were against their best interests. This story may sound familiar to you.

Around the same time all of this was going on, a book called *Hillbilly Elegy* climbed to the top of the New York Times best-seller list. It's written by a man about my age named J.D. Vance, who grew up in Southern Ohio, in the middle of the rust belt. He's a white, male, Republican, served in the Marines, graduated from Ohio State and Yale Law School, and is now a lawyer in Silicon Valley. Not exactly the kind of author I usually read, but the book came highly recommended, so I found a copy and read it. I read about his life in rust belt America: his fractured family life; the cultural norms and expectations of his people, so-called "hillbillies"; and the real despair that permeated the lives of his family, friends, and neighbors. It was a real exercise in listening to a different story that I confess I didn't think I had the patience or desire to hear, didn't always agree with, and from someone who, in many ways, stands opposite of me at the other side of a cultural divide.

While this encounter didn't happen at a well, and it wasn't really a conversation, J.D. Vance's story broke open the one story I had heard about this group of people. Reading other reflections on the book, I hear that I am not alone in this experience. For many, this book has advanced a conversation on the divisions we're facing as a country between urban and rural, professional and working-class, educated and uneducated. It's a collection of other stories that add nuance, depth, and humanity to a single story we may have heard. It causes us to stop and actually listen to other people and perhaps discover that, somewhere deep down, there is a stream of living water that erodes rock, soil, and clay to connect our lives and our experiences.

The living water that Jesus offers breaks down diving walls of prejudice and narrowness that prevent us from authentically listening to one another and to the many different stories we all have. We receive Christ's living water at our baptisms and become part of this stream of living water, working in partnership with Christ to erode all that divides us from one another. As we listen to one another and the many stories we each have to tell, we can be carried by this living water to discover connections we share in Christ. This connection may be between a mentor and mentee, Jew and Samaritan woman, east coast liberal elite and conservative working-class rust belt occupant, or other surprising conversation partners. May the Holy Spirit stir our hearts to be open to receiving and connecting with these surprising partners.