

3rd Sunday of Lent

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John 4:5-42 "Living Water"

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So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'



Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?' Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?' Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.'

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'

A stranger approaches a well in the hottest part of the day. He is tired and thirsty. At the well, the stranger meets a woman who has come to draw water, and something happens between them. It is the setup for more than one love story in the Hebrew Scriptures, but the prototypical meeting is that of Jacob and Rachel, in the book of Genesis. In that story, the sojourner Jacob comes to a well in "broad daylight" where he beholds his kinswoman Rachel and her father's sheep. He waters the sheep. "Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud." Boy meets girl; boy kisses girl; boy and girl marry and eventually (with a lot of help from her sister Leah) create a family of twelve tribes, the people of Israel. That's the way a love story is supposed to go.

In our reading from the gospel of John today, another tired, thirsty stranger meets a woman at a well: this time, at the very well named for this long ago ancestor Jacob. But we can quickly see that this is no typical love story. The stories from long ago involve fellow Hebrews meeting, usually distantly related. This story features Jesus, a Jewish male, and a woman who is an outsider in every way.

First, she is a Samaritan. The people in the region of Samaria, where Jesus is travelling, are regarded as half-caste Jews, half-breeds, who may have a common heritage but who worship falsely and have perverted the cleanliness laws, and the Jewish faith itself. The Samaritans, for their part, believe the same about the Jews. The Jews and the Samaritans have harbored decades, even centuries of ill-will; fighting about political, religious and territorial issues. Jesus should have viewed the woman with hostility and suspicion, for even touching her, never mind drinking from her pitcher, would make him unclean.

Which is why the Samaritan woman is so taken aback by Jesus' request: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" As she points out, she was, of course, a woman. In a patriarchal culture like Jesus' was,

women's sphere was the home and family. And while of course, they appeared in public, shopping in the markets, drawing water, doing laundry, they were expected to congregate together. They wouldn't think of speaking to a man that they didn't know in public, and no Jewish holy man or teacher would talk to any unknown woman in the street, Jewish or Samaritan.

But the woman is an outsider for yet another reason. There seems to be something not quite right about this woman, because she is gathering water in the middle of the day. At noon, in the hottest part of the day, when all others would stay inside, she has chosen to come out and do a hot, heavy task. Why does she not do in the morning? That is the time when the village women gather, to draw water, and share news about the doings and people of the village. I suspect she is there at noon because she is an outsider even in her own village. And why? We find out soon enough: she has had 5 husbands, and that she is not married to the man with whom she lives now. Our suspicions are confirmed: there is something about this woman, some scandal, some shame, some story.

We aren't told how she came to have been married five times. Previous generations of Christians tended to assume the woman was promiscuous, that she had divorced one man after another, going through men like others change their sheets, and that finally she had abandoned the charade of marriage and was willing to "shack up" with anyone who would have her.

But we have learned some things about what it was like for women in that time. One thing we know now is that women, not being equal to men, did not have the power to initiate divorce proceedings against their husbands, no matter how brutal the marriage might be. It was only in the power of men to undertake divorcing their wives. So perhaps the woman has been cast aside by five different men by now, one after another.

There's another possibility, that she had been widowed five times. It may be that the law of "Levirate" marriage had taken its toll on her. It was thought to be a great tragedy for a man to die without fathering a son, for there would be no one to continue his name and inherit his property. Ancient Jewish law dictated that if a man died without a son, one of his brothers living in the same village should marry the widow and thereby produce a boy who would be a legal son of the deceased. The son born this way would continue the deceased's family line, inherit the father's property, and his other, the widow would continue to be looked after by her husband's family.

Divorced five times, or widowed five times, passed along from brother to brother, and now living with a man without the sanction of marriage? We might feel sympathetic to her plight, but those hearing this story would have no doubt that this woman was bad news, living a life of shame.

No wonder she is so stunned when Jesus crosses every boundary that should keep them distant from one another. You can hear it in the edge in her questions and replies to him, a little suspicion, a little defiance. For Jesus closes the gap between them, crosses every boundary keeping them apart, the instant he draws near and asks for a drink of water.

We almost don't need to hear any more of the story to get a sense of the radical nature of Jesus, of the outrageous promise of the kingdom of God. Knowing everything he knew about the woman, knowing everything about the social boundaries that should have separated them and everything about a personal life that made her quite unacceptable – Jesus reaches out and enters into a relationship. More importantly, he offers living water, a life in the wisdom and Spirit of God that will sustain her long after the water from the well has run dry.

Yet, the woman misunderstands Jesus, as his words have a double meaning. "Living water" literally means, water that is running, like in a river, a stream, or a spring. Living water was believed to be more fresh, more pure, as opposed to the pooled, stagnant water you would find in, say, a well. And once the woman recognizes him as a prophet, through his amazing knowledge of the intimate details of her life, she continues to engage him, to question him, even to test him. She becomes convinced that this stranger is the Messiah, which means, someone who is anointed by God for a particular, special function. She tests out her intuition: "I know that the Messiah is coming," she says. Jesus confirms her guess: "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." She drops her water jar and runs back to the city. She approaches a group of people and offers them witness to what she has seen, and an invitation to come and see for themselves.

Jesus meets a woman who couldn't be more of an outsider, and he receives her as an insider, an intimate who has no cause for shame. He brings up her past, and her present, not to shame her, or even to offer some moral instruction on improving her way of life. Rather, he brings up her past and present shames to take away their power, to show how little they affect how Jesus and the God he proclaims receive her, regard her, welcome her, claim her. And he offers her living water, a relationship with God that is the only thing that can truly quench her thirst for love, for community, for acceptance, for belonging.

Jesus received the Samaritan woman with such love and such grace that she was profoundly transformed. She, who had once accepted the village's verdict that she was unfit for their company, now rushes into the very center of the village, demanding to be heard by those who were once her tormentors. And she IS heard; many believe in Jesus because of the woman's bold testimony.

And what is her testimony? It is repeated over and over, "He told me everything I have ever done. He cannot be the Messiah...can he?" It is in knowing

Jesus, and being known by him, and loved by him as she is, that sends her out to invite others to “come and see”. It is not even necessarily being completely sure: her proclamation is still tentative, “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” Yet even her tentative claims are a true witness that brings people closer to Jesus, which are infinitely reassuring to me, who definitely hasn’t figured it all out yet, exactly who this Jesus is and how exactly it is that he embodies and reveals this God I know and love and am loved by.

So the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman turns out to be a love story after all, for only one who loves you knows you as you are and not as you pretend to be. Only one who loves you knows your deepest desires. Only one who loves you can look at your past without blinking, and offer you new life.

I don’t know what you’re thirsting for, each and every one of you. I know that you came through the door the first time either because someone invited you to “come and see”, the way the Samaritan woman invited her community; or because you’ve felt a longing, or an emptiness, or a need that nothing else in your life has seemed to fill. For some of us, perhaps, this religion or faith business appealed as something like “the icing on the cake” of a largely successful and happy and good life.

Yet we’re discovering that a deepening relationship with God and with each other and with the world is not just something extra “on top,” but the very essence and vitality of life itself. We’re finding that when we drink of the living water that quenches whatever we are thirsting for – hope, security, belonging, forgiveness, a way of living with integrity – we find living water bubbling up in our lives and in the life of this community of faith.

And we’re living the extraordinary experience of being wooed by One who crosses every boundary to get to us, who breaks all the rules to love us. The One in whose presence we know who we really are. The One who quenches all our thirsts by giving a life that bubbles up inside us and flows out of us. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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