

John 4:5-42

⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)⁹The 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.)¹⁰Jesus 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."¹¹The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"¹³Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,¹⁴but 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."¹⁵The 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."

¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."¹⁷The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband' ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"¹⁹The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet."²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."²¹Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem."²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews."²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him."²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."²⁵The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."²⁶Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

²⁷Just 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?"²⁸Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,²⁹"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something."³²But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about."³³So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?"³⁴Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work."³⁵Do 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."³⁶The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together."³⁷For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.'³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done."⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.⁴¹And many more believed because of his word."⁴²They 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 Savior of the world."

A Cool Cup of Water

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I remember when I was a kid we would go out and play with our friends on a sunny day. We would play football, or tag, or ride our bikes all over the place. We would play so hard, sometimes we would forget just how thirsty we had gotten. And then we would end up in someone's front yard and the garden hose would come out, and we would all stand in line to get a good long drink from the hose. Someone usually got soaked during this experience, but that was ok with us. We were hot and tired, and most of all thirsty! Those were the days, weren't they?

And I still love a good drink of water. Not necessarily from the hose, but water is good, and I love a cool glass of water, especially when I've been out of town and had to drink that, 'city water.' You know what I'm talking about! Isn't it great to come back home and get a drink of that good old mountain water? I love it. As I was thinking about our passage this morning I happened to go into the grocery store to look at all the different types of water there. We are obsessed with water in this country, aren't we?

I was wondering if I could find any of that living water that Jesus was talking about. Oh there were all kinds of bottled water for sale. Perrier, Avian, Fiji, Dasani, Aquafina, Smart Water (we probably all need some of that), Vitamin Water, Flavored Water, Spa, Bleu, WAT-AAH!, Deja Blue, H2O (very original), but no living water. The closest I could find was something called Life Water. Bummer! Maybe like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, I'm taking things too literally? I thought it was worth a try!

Our story today finds Jesus as he encounters a woman at a well in the heat of the day. Unlike our encounter with Nicodemus which happened in the dark of night this story takes place in the bright and hot mid-day sun. I've never been to this part of the world before but everything I've read makes me believe that it was hot and dry, especially at this time of day. Doesn't seem like a particularly good time to be outside. And yet here they both are.

It is suggested that the woman at the well is here at this time of day because she has been ostracized by the community she lives in. Women usually came to the well in the early morning when it was still cool to get water for the day and to share their lives with one another. Get all the news that's worth getting and help one another with the difficult tasks of living. She obviously isn't included in that and feels that she needs to come to the well in the middle of the day when no one is around and it is here that she meets Jesus.

Now there is every good reason for neither of them to speak to each other or even acknowledge one another. There is a deep feuding history between the Jews and Samaritans that goes back for centuries to the time when the Jewish kingdoms were divided and carried away into exile. The Samaritans are Jews who in captivity intermarried and assimilated into their captor's cultures and because of that and perhaps for reasons too numerous to count were considered impure and no longer Jewish.

The Jewish community that we saw represented by Nicodemus in our reading last week represents those that remained pure and kept to themselves, obeying the Law, never mingling with those outside their race and culture. And while the Samaritans worship the same God, they didn't go to the Temple in Jerusalem but worshiped on Mount Gerizim because they were no longer welcome in the Temple in Jerusalem.

To make the story more interesting it needs to be said that according to theologian William Barclay "Palestine was only 120 miles long from north to south. But within that 120 miles there were in the time of Jesus three definite divisions of territory. In the extreme north lay Galilee; in the extreme south lay Judaea; and in between lay Samaria. If you wanted to travel from north to south, you had two options. You could go through Samaria or you could take a long detour around it turning what would be a 3 day journey into 6 days."

So, Jesus has deliberately chosen to pass through this area where he may not be welcomed and in our story this morning has an encounter with this amazing woman. What fascinates me about this encounter is that everyone is thirsty. Even Jesus is physically thirsty, another signal in the story that he is one of us and understands our lives and the difficulties of life. And the woman is thirsty too and we get to be witnesses today to that deep thirst of the spirit which we all ultimately share. And I love this woman's spunk, don't you? I love that she asks Jesus how he expects to get any water if he doesn't have a bucket! There is something they both need here and I love that idea.

The woman is often thought of as a woman who is of shady character or morals. One who has had five husbands and is now living with someone who is not her husband. But this is a wrong assumption as there is no indication that Jesus is condemning her or even judging her. He isn't asking her to repent of any sin or even offering her forgiveness for anything. The truth may be as one commentary stated "that her previous husbands may have died or divorced her, and she has perhaps had to marry her husband's brothers as religious law required or, at least, she had to get remarried in order not to suffer the harsh fate of an unattached female in that society. You had to have a husband, a father, or a son to take care of you, or you could end up a beggar or a prostitute or both. (That's why the Bible keeps telling us to look after the widows and the orphans: life has historically been hard for them.)

No, Jesus simply asks her for a drink and the conversation takes off from there, ultimately leading to his telling her everything about herself that she had hidden and sets her free. He sees her for who she is and offers her the living water that is his love and mercy and joy and undivided attention! And that encounter opens up the door to a rather deep and revealing conversation about life, religion, and faith. This encounter is very similar to the one we read last week with Nicodemus, who also was seen, but wasn't able to respond in the same way as the Samaritan Women. And I found myself drawing some parallels not only between the two stories but between our own stories.

In these first chapters of the Gospel of John we have stories about people on journeys of discovery, who move forward slowly in their understanding, but eventually, get it. Just like us. I couldn't help but wonder what John's early church members were thinking when they read a story like this. They too, were ostracized from the traditional Jewish Synagogue and community. While many of them were still Jews, they were followers of Jesus and no longer what they once were. The world was changing and of course by the time this gospel was written the Temple in Jerusalem had already been destroyed and lay in rubble.

The way of Jesus is spreading out into the known world to people, who like the Samaritan woman, were not strictly Jewish. Jesus is crossing borders and boundaries and offering everyone this living water. And it may be that there were some conflicts erupting between those who, like Nicodemus, were keeping the strict letter of the law and using that law to exclude others, and the followers of Jesus, who were seeking to be inclusive and follow the spirit of the law, opening the doors of grace and mercy to everyone. Didn't Jesus say last week something about water and spirit? "That no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."

It is a conflict that I sense in the world we live in today. A world where we have many religious communities, and not only Christians, who believe they know what God wants and who God is, and how the rules should be kept. Using their own understanding of God and their righteous lives to condemn or exclude or hate others. And Jesus is clearly showing us in this encounter, that it is precisely the opposite. That those who are socially unacceptable, condemned, judged, excluded, are the very ones he has come for and the very ones he seeks, and offers them living water, the living water of his love and grace and mercy. He has come, quite frankly, for all of us.

So I wonder who we want to be in the world. Should we be like other religious groups using our own understanding to exclude or condemn others? Tell them to go find their own well. Or shall we offer them the living water of Christ's love that flows through us into the world? Shall we see them truly and honestly or look the other way. Will we walk across borders and boundaries to find them and walk with them? To share a cup of water and a conversation about life, and what has meaning to that life. What kind of a world do we want this Kingdom world to be?

I'll leave you with this beautiful story by poet, songwriter, and novelist, Naomi Shihab Nye. She is an American of Palestinian decent. It is in many ways a living water story. A story where differences are set aside and true Spirit moves in and brings people together rather than apart. She tells it like this.

"Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been detained four hours, I heard an announcement: "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately." Well – one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there. An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. "Help," said the Flight Service Person. "Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this." I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke to her haltingly. "Shu dow-a, Shu-bid-uck Habibtu? Stani schway, Min fadlick, Shu-bit-se-wee?" The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, "You're fine, you'll get there, who is picking you up? Let's call him." We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her – Southwest.

She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for fun. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up about two hours. She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies – little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts – out of her bag – and was offering them to all the women at the gate.

To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo – we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie. And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving us all apple juice and they were covered with powdered sugar too. And I noticed my new best friend – by now we were holding hands – had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere. And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in this gate – once the crying of confusion stopped – seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost."

Once A Woman Seeking Water

BEACH SPRING 8.7.8.7 D ("God Whose Giving Knows No Ending")

Once a woman seeking water at a well not far from home
Met a thirsty, waiting stranger from a people not her own.
Would she give a drink of water and respond to human need?
Could she know the joy and wonder she, the giver, would receive?

She drew water for the thirsty; Jesus offered something more:
Living water, God's own mercy, love abundant, freely poured.
One, a blessing for the body; one, a blessing for the soul!
Both are gifts of our Creator — gifts that help to make us whole.

Still God's people carry water from their wells and mountain streams;
Still at rivers women gather, sharing labor, sharing dreams.
Still a cup of water given in a dry and weary place
Is a blessing overflowing from the fountain of God's grace.

God, we ask your richest favor on the work we seek to do;
May we gladly share clean water and your living water, too.
May we see the face of Jesus, and how far your love extends,
In the ones we call our partners — no more strangers, now our friends.

Biblical References: John 4:1-42; Matthew 10:42, 25:31-46

Tune: The Sacred Harp, 1844; attributed to Benjamin Franklin White ("God Whose Giving Knows No Ending")

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Jesus comes to all of us weary travelers and says, "I love you and want you to taste and see that God is good. That no matter where you've been or what the circumstances, I have come that you may have living water, living bread, water and spirit, love for one another and for God. And the rest...well, that just doesn't really matter, does it? Thanks be to God. Amen.