

Third Sunday in Lent

March 19, 2017

John 4:5-42

Living Water

Today we are going to try something different—out of routine and out of the box. Because it is so long and so rich, we are going to read this long gospel story of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well in parts—with the men speaking the part of Jesus and the women the part of the Samaritan woman. I will read the couple of bridge parts like a narrator and we all will say the lines of the disciples together. Your bulletin is marked so it won't be hard to follow. While you are reading and listening to others read, let this conversation soak in. Why is this gospel so long and what is it about? Why did John the writer think it was important for the reader to hear this story as a conversation? What is being said *under* what is being said? And what might this conversation be offering each of us exactly where we are in our lives right now?

Narrator: Jesus 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.

Men: "Give me a drink."

Women: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

Men: "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."

Women: "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?"

Men: “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.”

Women: “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Men: “Go, call your husband, and come back.”

Women: “I have no husband.”

Men: “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.

Women: What you have said is true!” “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”

Men: “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 worshipers 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.”

Women: “I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.”

Men: “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Narrator: 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.

Women: “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

All: “Rabbi, eat something.”

Men: “I have food to eat that you do not know about.”

All: “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?”

Men: “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 labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.’”

All: Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony,

Women: “He told me everything I have ever done.”

Narrator: So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word.

All: “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.”

We have heard for ourselves. And Amen for that. Thank you for your great reading today; now let’s go back and glean the Good News we just heard and spoke.

First, just to remind ourselves: what’s up with the Samaritans? You might recall that Samaria was in Jesus’ time in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, a region between Galilee and Jerusalem, named for a people who had originally been part of God’s chosen people the Israelites, but had been stripped of their Jewish identity for intermarrying with their Assyrian captors over 700 years earlier—something they probably had little choice about when the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell under military conquest. Because Samaritans

were historically Jewish, they had continued to worship the one true God as Jews did; though because they had been barred from the Temple in Jerusalem, they had created their own on Mount Gerazim. Cast out and considered not only inferior but unclean, Samaritans were hated by Jews, who avoided them whenever possible, even to the extent that when most Jews were traveling between Jerusalem and Galilee, they would take a long indirect route around Samaria, across the Jordan River along the other side and back again, adding days to their journey. Yet throughout the gospels, Jesus highlighted Samaritans, and walked right through Samaria on more than one occasion, fearlessly defying tradition and convention. In this story of the Samaritan woman at the well, it seems Jesus and the disciples had walked a considerable distance in any case, leaving them hot, tired, hungry and thirsty.

The disciples had gone off to find food, leaving Jesus alone with the opportunity to speak with the unnamed Samaritan woman. Notice that he begins the long conversation by making himself vulnerable, immediately crossing all boundaries of protocol by asking for a drink of water. Jesus was thirsty, and the woman had the means to offer him water. But this is no ordinary woman, for she doesn't run from Jesus, nor does she ignore him—either response would have been appropriate to a stranger approaching. She instead responds with a kind of reproach, asking Jesus why he doesn't know better than to speak with her. She knew her place as a Samaritan woman, and must have suspected some nefarious motives in a Jewish man speaking to her so directly.

Instead of being condescending, Jesus offers the woman *living water*. What made this woman hang in with this conversation? What tone of voice, what hint of kindness from this strange Jew might have held her in an exchange that did not really make sense? Whatever it was, he had her hooked, though she struggled to hold on to reality: How could he give her *any* kind of water without a bucket needed for so deep a well? What kind of water could actually *prevent* thirst, and save her from the tedious job of drawing a new bucket of water and carrying it home every single day?

The woman's skepticism is met with the gift of profound revelation when she becomes the *only* person in John's gospel to whom Jesus chooses to reveal himself. The language of Jesus is at first metaphorical and cryptic, and then he tells her outright, "I am he, (the Messiah) the one who is speaking to you." Jesus had told her about her own life—possibly not an easy one and likely through no fault of her own—and this drew her out of her own skepticism into a place of redemption so profound that she ran off leaving her water jar behind—a vessel she would not need to carry the *living* water with her into her village—shouting and sharing the Good News to everyone she saw.

Then the disciples get back from their errand just in time to hear the last line: "I am he." You can sort of imagine them thinking (not quite out loud), "we can't trust him to be left alone for 20 minutes without getting in trouble!" because speaking with a woman, much less one alone, and a Samaritan woman at that, would have been *way* outside the margins of acceptable behavior for a Jewish man in their time, much less a Rabbi. What the disciples witnessed between Jesus and this woman must have been so disturbing that, though they said nothing to Jesus, it kept them from understanding its meaning. "Rabbi, eat something." For surely Jesus must have been delirious from hunger and needed a quick snack.

Instead, Jesus shifts from talking to the woman about the living water that cures every thirst, to talking to the disciples about living food, that cures the deepest hunger for salvation. He tries to shift their attention from picking up dinner at the market, towards the fields that are ripe for gathering the fruit of eternal life. The sustaining food for Jesus was living into the will of his father, and sharing the abundance of salvation with absolutely everyone—even Samaritans.

Who are we in this story whose words we so said aloud? Are like we the disciples, ready to follow Jesus but not quite sure what that means in our lives yet? Are we like the woman, weary of a life of going every day to the well and getting only enough water to get by for one more day? Are we like the Samaritans, outsiders faithfully waiting for the Messiah and willing to suspend disbelief and protocols enough to invite Jesus to stay with them?

These are all questions to ask ourselves—as individuals and as a community of faith. Living in a world that pushes and pulls us in so many different directions and presents us with so many challenges and distractions, it is easy to miss those conversations that remind us of our salvation. There is an old song recorded by Kathy Mattea about 20 years ago called “Knee Deep in a River” about missed opportunities to experience relationships with friends and strangers that might have offered us a taste of living water. The refrain goes like this:

They roll by just like water
And I guess we never learn,
Go through life parched and empty
Standing knee deep in a river,
And dying of thirst.

The Good News in the gospel today is that Jesus wants us to have this *living* water. He has reached beyond all expectations to offer it to us; he reached all the way to the cross to give us water that will become in us springs of water gushing up to eternal life. By the gift of God this living water poured out of a rock in the desert for Moses, and poured out of the side of the crucified Christ. The rivers of living water that poured over us in Baptism, washed us in salvation, and they continue to wash us into the river of God, where we flow into God’s dream, carrying into the parched and empty lives of others the living water that needs no bucket and no well. This is Good News indeed, and so we pray, “Sir, give us this water, that we may never be thirsty.” Amen.