

The Well
John 4: 1-42

Reverend Heather Miner
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In Bible Study one woman shared, “I would love it if Jesus would move in for a year or two. Then I could see better how to be more like him.” As she spoke I could see her inviting Jesus in, welcoming him into her home, into her conversations, and her life. The image had come to her after a few minutes of prayer. It occurred to me that it doesn’t take long for us who are honest before God to recognize that we are spiritual people, desirous of deeper contact with the holy, desperate for conversation and direction that connects us to the divine.

The scene at the well is such an experience, a moment when Jesus makes his home with the woman. A woman goes about her daily chores, getting the water for the household, and at the well she meets Jesus. It is helpful to remind ourselves that the well was the setting for Isaac to meet his wife and Jacob, and Moses. The well is the place where love begins.

Love begins with a conversation.

The disciples full of their own hunger are away getting food, all 12 of them. So Jesus is left alone to sit by the well where I am certain, he expected, to meet someone. There are surely many less public places he could have sat for a rest. He sat at the well and remained there as he saw a woman coming toward him carrying a water jug.

It was necessary...that’s how our scripture explains why Jesus is in Samaria in the first place. Some scholars note he could have gone around Samaria. It might have taken longer, but he would have avoided that place. They suggest, “it was necessary” refers to a theological purpose. Others say it is the shortest route, and Jesus had much to do, so it was necessary he go that way. Scripture just says “dei” “it was necessary”...and Jesus remains at the well when the Samaritan woman approaches.

Samaritans and Jews didn’t like each other. It is said their hate stemmed from an old argument about where the proper place of worship was located. Samaritans believed it Mount Gerazim and Jews believed it to be

Jerusalem. Since it is the temple in which one is cleansed, those “cleansed” outside of the proper temple were unclean.

Jesus knew the prejudice. He might have even felt it within his own humanity. Still, “it was necessary” that he be there. He waits as the woman approaches. When she comes near enough I see him smiling a bit of a naughty grin and with a daring edge to his voice saying to her... “Give me a drink.”

The woman takes the bait and enters into the longest dialogue with Jesus there is in our entire scripture. Unlike most interchanges with Jesus, he doesn’t get angry with the woman at the end, nor does the dialogue melt down into a monologue, the woman disappearing from view. Instead, Jesus really seems to enjoy this woman and she him. Overhead, the noon light shines down on them...it is a time when there are no shadows.

The light contrasts the darkness that makes up the story told in John’s gospel before this one. There Nicodemus comes to Jesus with preset questions at midnight. After a couple of questions, Jesus gets angry, “Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” and silences Nicodemus with a long monologue that characterizes his speech in the gospel of John.

Instead of becoming impatient, Jesus solicits conversation with the woman with flirtatious theological statement. “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.”

Jesus’ response is flirtatious because his words mean for her to look more closely at him. His response is theological because Jesus chooses not to address the Samaritan and Jew hatred, but rather chooses to move God into the light. After all, this is a love story.

I met a good evangelist at the end of high school in my work at the public library in downtown Riverside. He was a young, attractive man who went around shelving books while singing. He was a good whistler too. The work at the library, shelving books, reading the stacks to make sure the books had been shelved correctly, could be quite tedious. I came to understand the word, circulation, all too well, the round about of it, the never ending cycle of books going out and coming in. In the midst of the monotony, this young man was a light. He was fun to be around and the

coup de gras, he was not afraid to talk about God. There was joy in his heart and he had pizzazz. I wanted a little of what he had. I wanted it to move inside of me. So one day, I rode my bicycle to the church he attended. I would like to say the church worked out for me. I was late. I slipped in unmet. I came in during the sermon, which had hell clearly in view. I left before the end, disappointed. I had met no one's eye.

I didn't want to avoid hell. I wanted more—I wanted Jesus to move in.

Our scripture suggests that Jesus was not above using his personal, embodied pizzazz to get this woman's attention. Indeed, the woman looks a little more closely at Jesus. She reacts to what she sees and to what she knows. Sir, the well is deep, you don't have a bucket, and are you saying you are greater than Jacob who gave us this well? You know, the water here has lasted a long time. Jacob and his sons and cattle all drank from here and so do we.

Jesus, who started all of this, looks into her face and speaks to her unspoken question: What more could I want? What more could there be?

What more do you want?

Theologians suggest that to be human is to reach out for God; to be made fully human is to experience God reaching back. God wasn't done creating us when he formed us from the dust of the earth. Our humanity is not defined by a sculpted form inside the garden but by the experience of loving and being loved by God.

Perhaps you first came to church because you tire of living into the sculpted form that became your life but left you feeling empty.

What more do you want?

Jesus catches the woman's eye...“Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give will never thirst; the water that I give will become in her a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

A spring, a fountain, that moves her soul to touch eternity.

The woman, with a new twinkle in her eye says, “Sir, give me this water that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.”

While John fits this story into a typical pattern of Jesus speaking, his words being misunderstood, and then he revealing what is truly meant, the telling of the story existed before John ever took hold of it. So I'm going to take a little poetic license and imagine the woman understood Jesus quite clearly. Her response isn't that she misunderstands Jesus as speaking about the physical, literal well in front of her, as so often written about in the commentaries. Rather I hear her response as a type of lover's code. Her words are akin to those newly in love who are afraid to risk saying "I love you," because the words are too new, the feeling too holy.

"Sir, give me this water that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw." Yes, I want to touch eternity. I want what you have to give me, to be more than the living statue who brings water from the well into the home. I want to be touched by God.

"Sir, give me this water...."

Just as Jesus' request begged for the woman to look more deeply at him, her request invites him to look more deeply into her.

It is unfortunate that Jesus' words that follow have often sent us down a rabbit trail: "Go call your husband and come here... You have had five husbands and him who you now have is not your husband." Such words have too often sent preachers into singing songs about "Looking for love in all the wrong places" emphasizing the woman's sinfulness.

But there is nothing to suggest in Jesus' tone that she has done anything wrong. In contrast to his words later to the "adulterous" woman he doesn't ask her to repent. To focus on her female sinfulness is to distance ourselves from the meeting with Jesus. While Jesus does save us, surely we don't believe that we are only to meet Jesus when we are in the midst of our own sin. It seems to me that is the least likely time we will be open to a conversation with our Lord.

Sotoko Yamaguchi, trying to reclaim this scripture from the preacher's sting writes, "When ordinary first-century women heard the story... undoubtedly, some women could immediately relate to her hard life of consecutive marriages, based on their own experience or that of their friends and neighbors. They might have imagined her as a very poor woman whose husband died early, perhaps a victim of war. Or, she may have been a daughter of a poverty-stricken family whose parents arranged her early

marriage to an old man with money. When her husband died...she quickly had to remarry in order to survive.... Such an experience of consecutive marriages might not have been so exceptional for poor women in the Roman colonies. “

Yamaguchi concludes, “In just one sentence Jesus showed his understanding of the depth of the hardship she had gone through in her life.” (*Mary & Martha, Women in the World of Jesus*, p. 32/33)

Other scholars argue for a symbolic reading of the Samaritan Woman’s multiple marriages. They note that in 2 Kings 17:24 ff it is told that “the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sephar-va’im and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the people of Israel; and they took possession of Samaria, and dwelt in its cities.” Could the 5 husbands of the woman in Samaria represent the 5 peoples who were brought into Samaria in 721 BCE? As for the 6th man, could it represent Rome, the one Samaria lives under but is not part of their household? (*Back to the Well*, Frances Taylor Gench, p. 113/114)

We are wise to not tie this story up with the frayed bows of the woman’s so called sinfulness but rather to allow the possibility that Jesus enjoys talking to her because of her nascent faithfulness. He looks deeply into her and draws out not a scarlet A but the deep desire of her soul.

As she notes he is without a bucket so he notes she is without a husband, without one who deeply loves her. She replies that he must be a prophet and gets to the heart of the matter. You Jews say we can’t worship on the mountain that is nearby...you Jews say we can’t experience God here. If to be human is to reach out for God and to experience God reaching back, then the woman, because of where she lives, is defined as something less than human, something less than the one who God breathed his very life into.

You say...

“Believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ..But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him.

When you reach out, wherever you are, whoever you are, in the midst of your routine—of the seemingly endless cycle of comings and goings, you

can hear a new song, one that calls you to experience God as Father...one that calls you into his kingdom, his family.

Oh, I know that will be the case in the future, she replies. When the Messiah comes, he will show us all things. Someday I will be able to know God, to experience God's love, to be close to him.

Jesus says, "I who speaks to you am he."

As the tears start to form in her eyes, the disciples return, take one look at the scene and ask "Why are you talking with her?"

It was necessary...

For someone who was a Samaritan to meet Jesus. The prejudice was too deep. The disciples were too distant. The Samaritans were too far outside of the kingdom's view.

One sows and another reaps

The woman went away, leaving behind the water she came to draw and she told the people of Samaria..."Come and see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?"

They came to Jesus. They asked Jesus to stay with them. Many more believed because of his word. They said...we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.

There are many signs that we in Orange County are a spiritual people, desirous of deeper contact with the holy, desperate for direction and conversation that connects us to the divine.

I used to be somewhat embarrassed about being a minister. I think that embarrassment came from worrying about how those I met would look at me, rather than really seeing into them. I didn't want to be seen as a crazy Christian standing on a street corner, shouting out doom that comes to those who don't believe. I also didn't want to start an argument about my being a woman minister. My prejudice was to believe that my faith would be seen as somewhat crazy, unBiblical, that which creates wars, unsophisticated, rather than to think that people here also long for the love of God.

God has changed my heart. Today, I am glad for the conversations that come my way. I enjoy receiving a phone call from a long time acquaintance who wants to talk about why he feels distant from God. I welcome the people at the Bridge table who, upon learning that I am a minister, want to talk about their church. I am thankful for those who I marry who invite me to their rehearsal dinner so I might have an exchange of ideas with those who are thinking about God. There are always some who seek me out.

On Thursday I was asked to bless a house in which a worker was still working. As I waited for the owner, sitting, praying, in my minister's robe, we spoke a few words and then he said in an off the cuff way "remember to bless us workers too, I could use a God shot." So when we got to the room in which he worked, God gave me a prayer and I spoke it...and I could feel God at work in him. When I saw him a few minutes later, I could see in his face, he could feel God too.

I see now that many people feel a lot like the Samaritans...left out of the Kingdom's view, less than human. I believe that Jesus simply asks us to have a conversation with those the spirit puts on our path in a way that honors their nascent faithfulness and allows them to open the door.

People long to experience God. Everyday they come to the well, doing what they are supposed to do, but wanting more.

It is necessary...

For us who have met Jesus at the well to go out, to simply do what Jesus did, to do what the woman did, talk with someone as if they too desire to meet the one who knows everything they ever did...made...are...

Love always begins with a conversation.

You possess the living water...where is your well?