

Living Water
John 4:5-42

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I am eager to dig in to this story about the Samaritan woman. For me, it has always been among the more memorable stories in John's gospel. The image of living water is a beautiful one that is conjured a little differently in each mind and in each hearing. The story has always been remarkable to me for its boundary-crossing power.

Jesus is a Jewish man passing through Samaria on his way from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north. Jesus is resting at Jacob's Well where he encounters a woman who has come to draw water. Jesus is thirsty, so he asks the woman for drink. It was certainly not customary for a Jewish man to ask a Samaritan woman to draw water from the Samaritan well with a Samaritan bucket. There may not have been signs above Jacob's Well defining who could or could not drink there, but it was well known that Jews and Samaritans did not share things like drinking cups and water buckets. To Jewish minds, Samaritans were a defiled people; using a common cup could cause a Jew to become defiled, too. You could sum up the whole civil rights movement on Jesus' activity in this one instance alone. He is doing something radical. Even his disciples are astounded. For this reason, alone, Jesus is a hero in this story.

I've read and studied this story more times than I can remember. But as I read it again and again this week, something new stood out to me. Generally, that nameless Samaritan woman is portrayed as a weak outsider bent low by shame. Not only is she a Samaritan (strike one) and a woman (strike two), but she is also known to have had five husbands and currently spends time with a man who is not her husband (strikes three, four, five, six, seven, and eight). No doubt this woman felt the constant disdain of her neighbors and the sting of being Samaritan whenever she encountered a Jew. But I am not sure she thought of herself as "bent low."

First of all she is brazen. She openly challenges Jesus' association with her in the first place. And when Jesus speaks of living water, she is incredulous: "You have no bucket. Where do you think you are going to get this 'living water'?" And then, convinced that Jesus might have something to offer after all, she makes no bones about asking for it: "Give me this water so that I will no longer have to come to this well."

Second, this woman is shrewd. She knows which cards to play and which ones to hold close to her chest. Jesus tells her to go call her husband and come back. Her answer is brief, and deceptively honest: "I have no husband."

Up to this moment in the conversation, it seems to be this nameless Samaritan woman who is in control, who carries the momentum of the meeting. Jesus initiates the conversation with his request for a drink. But the woman is making sure she gets what she needs. After all, that is what she has done to take care of herself every day until now.

Suddenly Jesus turns the tables on this woman's in-control demeanor. Jesus already knows more than she has revealed. Jesus knows this woman at least as well as she knows herself, and he exposes 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." Jesus sees those closely protected cards, but the knowledge itself is not particularly amazing. The whole town already knows about those five husbands. It is not that Jesus pulls back the curtain on some bit of information. What he does is pull back the curtain on this woman's illusion of control and self-sufficiency.

Until this moment, the woman has met Jesus on her terms. She will decide whether to give him water. She will decide which details about her life to reveal. But Jesus does not wish to know her only on her terms. Jesus does not will to know only part of this woman. Jesus already knows this woman in full, and Jesus desires to give himself fully to her.

I suspect that we each have some illusion that we hold on to tightly, not just for the sake of others, but even for our own sake. For some it is the illusion of wealth and financial security – despite a reality of debt and nagging fear. For some it is the illusion of a happy marriage or family – despite evidence of brokenness all around. Some will walk around with heads held high – not because of self-confidence, but to avoid the downward gaze of others. Whatever the realities of our lives, we each strive to protect what is most dear to us – even if we have to lie a little to ourselves in the process. We protect these lies and illusions so carefully, because we are afraid that if anyone knew the truth, they would certainly judge or abandon us.

Just as Jesus entered the world of the Samaritan woman and knew her exactly as she was, so Jesus enters our world and our lives. The Psalmist proclaims, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. . . . Even before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely" (139:1-4). There is not a thing in your life that is not already known to Christ. Not a failure, not a success, not an embarrassing moment, not an honest mistake or a dishonest one. All of this is already laid bare to Christ who knows you fully. It is in being fully known and loved that we are equipped to meet Christ as he comes to us – on his terms. Christ pulls back the curtain on our hidden selves, invites us to step into the light, and be welcomed and loved by him. This is the invitation that changes everything.

I was talking with a friend earlier this week, and she told me about one of her neighbors whose cancer had recurred four times. Each time, my friend called her neighbor to offer a word of support or delivered a casserole. And each time, the call or the gift was received kindly but without additional comment or conversation: "Thank you. We're doing pretty well right now." My friend finally assumed that her neighbor was just a private person. When the cancer recurred the fourth time, she once again packed up a casserole and a good book and delivered it to the neighbor. On this fourth visit, the neighbor opened wide the door and shared openly with my friend about the physical and emotional battle she is fighting. The love of Christ flowed like a river of living water.

Christ comes to us as individuals and encounters us in the midst of our own experiences. The good news of welcome that the Samaritan woman experienced by the well probably sounded a little different than the good news of persistent care experienced by the four-time cancer fighter.

Both experienced the unconditional, relentless love of Christ. But they experienced it in unique and personal ways. That is exactly how Christ comes to us – where we are and as we are.

And that is exactly how we share Christ with others. We need not have eloquent words or even words at all. When the Samaritan woman abandoned her water jar and ran to tell her neighbors about the man whom she had met, she was not even entirely sure that he was the Messiah. She only knew that he knew her entire life and welcomed her anyway. Likewise, we simply need to remember what it was like to meet Christ in our world of experience, and invite others to see for themselves what good news Christ might bring into their world. Like the Samaritan woman and like my friend, we use our best gifts (be they a brazen personality or culinary skills) to share a little of the living water that gushes up within us. “We . . . do not become the source of living water, but we do become its conduit.”¹ It is as though in our own personal encounters with Christ, God digs his well in our hearts and fills it with water for abundant life and plenty of water to share.

Sure we want to keep it all together, to present ourselves the way we want to be, instead of the way we are – in debt, broken, sick, sinful, or proud. But we also long to be known just the way we are, faults and flaws and all – and still be loved. And like a persistent friend, Jesus continually comes to us and refuses to accept our facades. He sees us as we really are and that is exactly the way he welcomes us. And yet he also sees and knows our best selves – the selves God created us to be. His unconditional and inexhaustible love nourishes us to become those best selves until the love of Christ well up in us so much that it becomes a spring gushing up and overflowing into the lives of others.

¹ Meda A. A. Stamper, “Return to Me . . . Preaching the Lenten Texts.” *Journal for Preachers*. Volume XXXIV, No 2. p.7.