

Back to the Well
The Rev. Michael Blackwood
United Church of Broomfield
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John 4:1-42

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, 'Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John' — although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized — he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. 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.'

It was about noon when Jesus approached the Samaritan city of Sychar and made his way to the well. Jacob's well was a famous well, the site of history-making Bible stories, like the story of Jacob and Leah and Rachel.

Jesus went to the well that day and encountered a woman there, a Samaritan woman. What follows in our John passage is the longest and most in-depth personal conversation between Jesus and another person ever recorded in the biblical text. As we've been reading *Back to the Well; Women's encounters with Jesus in the Gospels*, we've been reminded that in the Bible, women rarely have a voice of their own. They're often spoken of, spoken about and spoken for, but rarely do they speak. And lo-and-behold, the longest and most in-depth personal conversation Jesus has is a with a woman. It's about time.

Jesus starts things off by asking for a drink of water, and before you know it Jesus and the woman are talking about things too personal for polite company. One minute the objective was a drink of water; the next minute everything changes; someone's life is on the line; all the preconceived ideas held by the Samaritan woman, Jesus' disciples, the Samaritan citizens of Sychar . . . all of them were suddenly being dissolved by a power much larger than they had ever seen before . . . the power of water, living water, like a universal solvent, dissolving the callous shells of their hard, assuming hearts and opening their lives to new, life-giving possibility.

And as we return to the well also, our hardened hearts, full of assumption and judgement are hopefully softened as well, by the power of the living water.

If you've been around church for any length of time you may have heard the Samaritan woman at the well story before, but do we really know how shocking this passage of scripture really is? Do we understand how diverse, intricate and misunderstood it is? This story flies in the face of convention, breaks rules, challenges social morays and violates preconceived standards for behavior. Over the centuries, more often than not, the sermons and messages that are given in response to this story appear to explicate the "true meaning" of the story, but in reality, miss out on fascinating and hopeful possibilities.

First of all, we might not automatically know that Jesus' travel into Samaritan territory was unexpected and totally inappropriate. Our only hint is in verse 4, "**BUT** he has to go through Samaria." Samaritans and Jews were living in the middle of an ethnic division that had started hundreds of years before, after the death of King Solomon. When the Northern and Southern kingdoms of Israel split, the 10 tribes of Israel who banded together claimed Samaria as their capital. When the Assyrians took the nation of Israel into captivity, it was the strategy of their king to import back into the captured land settlers from Babylon to intermarry with the Jews left there. As a result, a hybrid race developed, called Samaritans.

When the Jews returned from exile in Babylon, sharp ethnic divisions became apparent. Samaritans looked down on the Jews who had gone to Babylon while they stayed and kept things going. The Jews were horrified that the Samaritans would even call themselves Jews, as they had intermarried and modified religious practice because of these varying cultural influences.

The bottom line is that there was great animosity between the groups, with each considering the other to be corrupt. In fact, Jewish law maintained that a righteous Jew would hold nothing in common with a Samaritan, and while passing through Samaria to reach Jerusalem was the quickest way to travel, religious Jews would go far out of their way to avoid even passing through Samaritan territory.

Jesus should not, unless he was completely desperate, be anywhere near the region of Samaria. In doing that he risked exactly what happened next: an unlawful encounter with a Samaritan. I think we can all agree that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing.

There was a woman at the well, drawing water in the heat of the day.

We don't live in an arid climate, and we certainly don't draw our own water, so we perhaps would not know that drawing water was a regular event, twice a day, done by every household in the city. If you didn't draw the water you needed for the day's tasks, you wouldn't be able to complete essential tasks for daily living.

The well, as you can imagine, was the hub of community life, like our Starbucks on the corner, where every day without fail everyone could get caught up on the news of the village, hear the

latest gossip or conduct necessary business. And, given the heat of the region, you'd want to go to the well early in the morning or at dusk when the sun was not so hot. Lugging water is hard work, you know. And it was the women who had the responsibility of carrying the water from the well to the village, every morning, every evening, every day.

We don't know much about this Samaritan woman. We don't even know her name. But we do know that she was at the well drawing water in the heat of the day, the worst time possible, either avoiding folks or being avoided by the crowd in the village. For whatever reason, she was on the margins of her society.

We have Jesus in Samaria – unexpected.

We have a woman at the well, enduring the searing heat in the middle of the day – unexpected.

The next unexpected thing? Jesus walks right up and talks to the woman, who talks back to him. I think we all understand the gender inequality, to put it mildly, that existed at that time that would have forbade him from talking to foreign women in general. But here he is, talking to a woman who was a Samaritan and who was, for whatever reason, an outcast in her own community.¹

Notice that when the disciples return, their astonishment is not that Jesus was speaking to a Samaritan, but “to a woman!”

Jesus and the Samaritan woman talk. They talk about water, living water. They talk about worship, true worship. They talk about family, hers and his.

As I was reading *Back to the Well*, I was surprised to learn that the Samaritan woman wasn't always portrayed negatively.

Church historian Craig S. Farmer examined how the Samaritan woman's portrait evolved over time and he found that ancient and medieval commentators portrayed her as “well-meaning if not a dim-witted woman whose intellect is gradually enlightened to an understanding of Jesus' divine status” (Gench, pg 121). This is not exactly a glowing description, but it not cruel either. In the 4th century, John Chrysostom said, “...she is even superior to the apostles, who left their fishing nets only after being commanded by Jesus; in contrast, she leaves her water jar of her own accord and performs apostolic work with a zeal and fervor worthy of emulation” (Gench, pg. 121). Then in the reformation, things changed; the Gospel didn't change, but society and theological enlightenment in a male-dominated world did.

John Calvin said of the woman's five marriages, “the reason of this probably was, that, being a froward and disobedient wife, she constrained her husbands to divorce her” (Gench, pg 116).

¹ Rev. Amy Butler, “I Confess: My Heart was Hard.”

Calvin then goes on to re-interpret Jesus own words in verse 18 as saying, “Though God joined [you] to lawful husbands, [you did] not cease to sin, until, rendered infamous by numerous divorces, [you prostituted yourself] to fornication.”

Today, there are many similar perspectives where most preachers hone in on the woman’s five marriages and how it *must* mean that she was sexually promiscuous. In *Back to the Well*, biblical scholar Sandra Schneiders says, “I will interpret the passage as a feminist who does not assume that most women...are whores and that Jesus’ paradigmatic relationship with women is centered on saving them from their sexual sins...” (Gench, pg.123).

Historically, the message that we get is there is hope for salvation. Hope for salvation is great, but at what cost when the interpretation of the story is that if even this female, Samaritan, harlot can receive living water, so can you.

As our book has explicated, the Samaritan woman is castigated as stupid and salacious. Is that a possibility? Perhaps - but that’s only because our androcentric society has perpetuated it for its own benefit. It’s easier to preach God’s merciful love and salvation for everyone if the woman is portrayed in the worst possible light. It’s more difficult for men to preach the fact that this woman was a smart woman who was a victim of her time, yet still more than qualified (even over-qualified) to do apostolic work than the disciples.

She was smart, savvy and aware. She was able to engage a Jewish teacher in a conversation about Jewish customs and laws. She was insightful and self-reflecting, “everything I know and everything he says points to the fact the he IS the Messiah, but can it be?”

As for her five marriages, the Greek doesn’t use the word divorce at all. It says that she has had five husbands. There is no explanation as to why or how this has transpired. She could have been widowed five times. In our hardened hearts, the immediate assumption has been to blame her for divorce. If divorce is the case, let’s not forget that divorce was initiated by men in that time, not by women. If she was divorced it was not by her choosing. AND... men could divorce their wives for any reason including promiscuity on the woman’s part (men can be promiscuous in marriage), burning his food or finding another more attractive woman.²

Then there’s the possibility she was trapped in the custom of levirate marriage, which dictated that with the death of her husband, she was obligated to get married to her husband’s brother. Who knows how many brothers there were? Or if any refused to marry her, leaving her in societal limbo?

These valid possibilities are overlooked because they’re not as dramatic as, “she’s a whore.”

² <https://steinsaltz.org/daf/gittin90/>

Hope for our salvation includes that we not assume things about others. This story gives us hope for salvation, but not simply because God's mercy provides living water to anyone and everyone, but because of the example that Jesus provides. Jesus goes out of his way, literally to Samaria where *he ought not go*, to engage in dialogue and relationship.

In all of the sermoning that happens about this story, let's not forget the lessons of relationship. "Jesus models genuine dialogue and appropriate method with 'his humble approach which gives the advantage to the dialogue partner, in his deep respect for the woman, in his deference for her views and that of the disciples, in his gracious acceptance of the invitation of the Samaritans, and in his leading both the woman and the disciples each in her/their own way through a process of discovery'" (Gench, pg. 128). Being in relationship with one another is true worship. When we choose to not assume, not be judgmental and soften our hearts toward others we receive the blessing of living water through conversation, fellowship, friendship and hospitality.

No matter who he encountered, Samaritan, woman, Pharisee, Roman ruler, Jesus always offered the possibility, well, actually, the probability, of the parts of your heart and my heart that are hard in such a way that they cut us off from other people and from the grace and love of God, hard parts of us that can be softened, softened by the powerful solvent of the living water.

This third Sunday of Lent, we confess: sometimes our hearts are hard. Sometimes we see the world in ways that do not allow for the upending of convention, much less the ever-creating work of God's Spirit. And our hard hearts can lead us to lives of isolation and disconnection, to opinions that cut us off from people who are different than we are; to positions that leave us all alone at the wells of our lives; to hearts that are dried up and shriveled into hardness, unable to beat in time with God's great love for the world.

We confess: like the people Jesus encountered in Sychar that day, sometimes our hearts are hard.

Today we ask for the universal solvent of the living water to rush over our hard hearts, to begin the process of bringing us a little further along the road to reconciliation with each other and with God, to engulf us and heal us and give us hearts soft enough to absorb into every pore of who we are, the living water.

Amen.