

Through the Waters of Life

Second in a 4-part series
Encounters with Jesus

from the pulpit of
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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,¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.”¹⁷ The 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!”¹⁹ The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.²³ 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.²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”²⁵ 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.”²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”²⁷ 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?”²⁸ Then 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?”³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.”³² But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.”³³ So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?”³⁴ Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.³⁵ 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.³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.³⁷ For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.”⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word.⁴² 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 Savior of the world.”

We all know that water is essential to life. It is the fluid inside most living organisms, and it covers more than 70 percent of the earth's surface. Water is a substance of great power. It is necessary for survival, and yet too much of it can be terribly threatening and destructive. Water also carries powerful symbolism in every major religion of the world – as a purifier. In the Bible, images of water abound! In Proverbs, good news from afar is “like cold water to a thirsty soul.” The prophet Jeremiah describes God as the “fountain of living waters,” and Amos calls for justice to “roll down like the waters, and righteousness as an ever-flowing stream.”

The Psalms pray with people who are overwhelmed as “if engulfed by roaring waters;” and describe our human yearning for God as a deer longs for flowing streams. The New Testament describes baptism as being washed clean of our sin, and being buried with Christ in his death and raised up by Christ's resurrection. It is no wonder, then, that villages were built around springs of water, which not only provided a source of life for people, plants and animals, but they also became places of profound religious significance.

Jesus' encounter with the *Woman at the Well*, is such a place. The well where they meet has a history, and the story that unfolds there plunges into the depths of meaning for both physical and spiritual life. At this well in Sychar, Jesus engages in the longest conversation he has with anyone in all of scripture, and there are three really unusual things about it.

First, Jesus is traveling from Judea to Galilee, John tells us, and Jesus did not have to go through Samaria to get there. It is an unnecessary detour, to fulfill what we heard last Sunday when Jesus told Nicodemus, “For God so loves the world.” Samaria represents the world, and in Jesus' day Samaritans were foreigners despised by devout Jews. They were the descendents of mixed marriages among Jews and Arabs; and as a result they had a mixed up religion – Judaism combined with vestiges of earlier pagan religions, so both racial *and* religious hatred

were intense between Samaritans and Galilean Jews. Secondly, Jewish men did not talk to women in public. Men do not talk to women in public in many areas of the Middle East even today. And this is Jacob's well – which conjures up those old romantic stories of Jacob falling in love with Rachel; it's a special place, a historic place, a romantic place, and Jesus should not be there talking to this Samaritan woman! Third, this woman has had five husbands and the man she's with now is not even her husband!

A lot of scholarly ink has been spilled over this poor woman's love life, but suffice it to say, the only reason she is drawing water from the well - in the noonday sun - is that she is not the kind of woman who is welcome among the other village women, who all went in the cool of the day. She remains nameless to us, but you can bet everyone in that town of Sychar knew who she was. You see, the scene is set for scandal. She is a triple outsider. Race, religion and culture all conspire to separate her from Jesus. But here is Jesus chatting up a storm with a Samaritan woman at noon for all the world to see. They do have one thing in common: Jesus is thirsty and so is she. Jesus turns to the woman and asks her to draw him a drink of water. And here is where the narrative of scandal is overmatched by the gospel's grace.

According to Charles Page, a scholar of Middle Eastern history, during the first century there was a common custom related to the offering and receiving of water. If a person offers another a drink of water, and the act is accepted, this gift of water becomes a social contract of friendship for one year. If Jesus were to ask her for a drink, and she were to say, "Help yourself," she would be saying: You can drink from the well, but not have my friendship. If, however, Jesus asks this woman for a drink, and the woman complies, they are bound in friendship for one year. Jesus is inviting this despised foreigner of questionable faith and ill repute into a relationship. That's why she is startled when Jesus asks for water, not because he is thirsty, but she hears him saying beneath his words, "I would like to be your friend." Jesus not only tears down every social barrier that would keep them

strangers, even enemies of one another, he chose to count her among his friends.

This is a story about the radically inclusive love of God - who sees no barrier between race, gender, or social standing. Further, Jesus offers to quench her thirst with something that runs deeper and fresher than the waters of life have given her so far. When their conversation turns from drinking water to Living Water, and the woman says “I know that the Messiah is coming,” and he replies, “I am he,” it is the first time Jesus has said that to another living soul. “It is a moment of full disclosure, shining brightly in the noonday sun, while all the rules, taboos and history that separate them fall forgotten to the ground.”

Do you know anyone, like her, who is thirsty for something that mere water cannot quench? Any people not fully at home in their own community? Anyone who bears the scars from a difficult past? Any person who knows the bullying gossip of others? Do you recognize in her someone else who is alone – in the worst kind of loneliness experienced when surrounded by other people and yet still not belonging. Jesus meets her, and he meets us, at that well, and as if singing a verse from our opening hymn, *“When through the deep waters I call thee to go, the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow, for I will be near thee, thy troubles to bless and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.”*

Through the Woman at the Well, Jesus offers to be *our* friend, and invites us to see in him the presence of God, who knows who we really are, and despite our past, and our need for forgiveness, and our yearning for something more than life has dished up thus far, he accepts us for who we are, and gives us the Living Water of overwhelming love.

In Jesus Christ, God crosses boundaries, breaks tired old conventional rules, drops the disguises and speaks to us like someone who has known us all our life, bubbling up in us like water from a well that needs no dipper. So that we can go back to face people we thought

we could never face again, speaking to them as boldly as Jesus has spoken to us:

“Come and see someone who told me everything I have ever done, and loves me anyway.” Perhaps the scariest thing to realize is that when we stand beside that Well in Sychar and look down into the Living Water Jesus offers what we really see is the reflection of our own faces. And what we hear is Jesus saying, “In all that you are, the good and the bad of it, the regret and the sadness of it, whatever it is that makes you feel like an outsider, I want to be your friend too.” All we have to do is to acknowledge our own thirst for the Living Water he offers.

Eric Wilson is an English Professor at Wake Forest University, and he has done some interesting work on the value of admitting our own sorrow, sadness and melancholy. A serious, professorial type, he begins with a rather humorous story of how he was urged by his friends to become happier. He bought how-to books on Happiness which are a dime a dozen these days. He made a concerted effort to smooth out his habitual scowl with a sunny smile. He took up jogging to boost the brain’s supply of uplifting neuro-chemicals. He watched movies with happy endings, and consciously sprinkled his conversations with words like “great!” and “wonderful!” When none of this how-to-be-happier behavior actually made him happy, he began to study how all of us *do* experience seasons of sadness and sorrow, and how paying attention to the downside of life, is as valuable as the upside.

He is joined by other scholars in many fields, including mental health, who assert that a pure fixation on happiness not only denies a necessary full range of emotions, but it also fosters a “disregard for the value of sadness and its integral place in the great rhythms” of life. Careful not to extol depression or treatment of it, these scholars are suggesting we recover space in our cultural life for sadness and melancholy. Their scholarship mentions the great work that emerged from people wrestling with their own sadness: people like Abraham Lincoln, Vincent Van Gogh, Beethoven, Emily Dickinson, and even the

cartoonist Charles Schultz. Convinced that honest introspection has its purpose in helping us be more analytical and more innovative, they say sorrow can generate, and I quote: “a turbulence of heart that results in an active questioning of the status quo, a perpetual longing to create new ways of being and seeing.”

Eric Wilson writes, “the blues can be a catalyst for a special kind of genius, a genius for exploring the boundaries between opposites.”¹ Sorrow - a catalyst for a special kind of genius, for exploring the boundaries between opposites. A very sad woman... a man named Jesus. A despised Samaritan... a Galilean Jew. Water... Living Water. Thirsty... never thirsty again.

The Samaritan woman knows she is thirsty for something that well water simply would not satisfy. She takes her sadness, her isolation, her need for confession, her emptiness – all to the well that day. And there, in the noon day sun, for all the world to see, Jesus offers her Living Water.

He gives her grace, forgiveness, and the kind of full acceptance only God can give. He invites her to be his friend. And she, in turn, goes and invites others: “Come and see.” And, by God’s grace, they do. The crowds come and see and exclaim: “This is truly the Saviour of the world!”

What a refreshing way to end a story....What a refreshing way to begin a new chapter of life....

AMEN

¹ Sharon Begley, “Happiness: Enough Already,” *Newsweek*, February 11, 2008.