



“At the Well”
Scripture – John 4:1-42
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, March 19, 2017

I wonder what would have happened if this woman had come to draw water in 21st Century America. Upon seeing her approach the well, how many of us would have pulled out our phones and tried to avoid eye contact?

With those ragged clothes, I bet she’s asking for a handout.

Or: Hmm ... she’s wearing a head scarf. Guess she’s not from around here.

Or: Ugh ... I watched her pull into the parking lot; those bumper stickers tell me everything I need to know.

Perhaps I’m being cynical. Perhaps I’m underestimating our capacity for grace as fellow citizens, even as people of faith. But in today’s day and age, it’s easy to feel like we’re lost in a maze of 10-foot walls that separate us from each other.

That’s why now — more than ever — we need stories like this: stories that remind us that such division is neither new nor inevitable, that division does *not* reflect God’s vision for creation. We need stories that teach us that there is salvation to be found in embracing others. This, after all, is key to Christ’s mission ... and it is precisely why he heads to Samaria in this passage from John. You see Jesus had to go through Samaria. Not because it was on the road back to Galilee (the city of Sychar was actually a bit out of the way). But because it was *necessary*.¹ The Greek verb used here implies compulsion or duty ... It even expresses the will of God. Jesus *needed* to pass through Samaria in order to fulfill his mission. It makes sense; we did just read in John 3:16 that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (I bet some of you remember that verse from Sunday school). God so loved the *world*. Jews and Romans and Syrophenicians, and – yes – even Samaritans. Even those ‘back-country cousins’ the Jews would prefer to forget. Jesus *had* to go through Samaria.

So we find the Messiah by a well in Sychar, tired out from his round-a-bout journey. And we know right away that something significant is about to happen. Not only because Jesus has set out to fulfill his mission, but because he has stopped at a well. At *Jacob’s* well, to be precise. At the *very* well where Jacob met his beloved bride, Rachel. Throughout the Old Testament, the Well is the place where Boy-Meets-Girl;² it’s the precursor to the church singles’ group, and the bar, and Match.com ... John is setting the stage for a significant encounter.

¹ Sermon Brainwave Podcast #530 – Third Sunday in Lent, www.workingpreacher.org.

² See also: Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 24) and Moses and Zipporah (Exod 2).

But – unlike in those Old Testament stories – it is not the “perfect catch” who comes around the corner. It is a nameless woman coming to draw water in the heat of the day. A *Samaritan* Woman. A five-time widow, or — more likely — a five-time divorcee — cast off by multiple men, presumably because she is barren.³ A woman who comes to the well at high noon because none of the other Samaritan women want anything to do with her. This is a woman on the margins, even of her own community. She is a pariah. An outcast. A woman whom no one loves, but who desperately needs the love of Christ.

And — because God so loves the world — something amazing happens: She receives it. Because God so loves the world, Jesus crosses the boundary. He casts off the rigid religious rules; he defies expectation ... He strikes up conversation: “Can I have a drink?” It’s a simple request ... but one that conveys so much more than his thirst: it conveys vulnerability. His question levels the playing field *just enough* that this Jewish man and this Samaritan woman can actually have a conversation. He takes a risk that begins a relationship.

It surprises the heck out of this Woman at the Well. Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans, after all. But, undeterred by the woman’s reticence, Christ continues. He offers her Living Water. Forget the fact that Jews despise Samaritans. Forget the fact that single men do not converse with scorned women. Forget the barriers and the stereotypes — there is something precious to be found here. And, it’s something that satisfies the soul far more than water could ever satisfy thirst: It’s the love and grace of God. And, it flows in abundance here at the well.

Love and grace flow freely, even as this woman’s secret — as this woman’s shame — is laid bare. Even as Christ names the truth that isolates her: “You have had *five* husbands, and the one you have now is *not* your husband.” These are words *not* of condemnation (as many have tried to suggest) ... but are words of compassion.⁴ For Jesus sees this woman for who she is — One who has been deemed unlovable, unworthy ... one who has suffered the loss of relationship, the loss of community. And, in naming her truth — in revealing who She is — Jesus also reveals who He is. Or, at least, he opens the way to revelation. “Sir, you are a prophet,” she says. *Tell, me — where is the right place to worship?* It’s a loaded question coming from a woman of Samaria ... for this is the issue that has divided Jews and Samaritans for centuries. *Tell me, Sir, which of us is right?* And, with his reply, Jesus surprises her yet again. *It doesn’t matter.* It doesn’t matter *where* you worship, but *how* you worship. When the Messiah comes, you will see that you must worship in Spirit and Truth ... You will find salvation *not* in practices that have inspired division, but in relationships that heal. You will find salvation in community — in dwelling with Christ and those who belong to him.⁵ When the Messiah comes, *this* is how you will encounter God.

“I know that the Messiah is coming” the Samaritan woman says, hope stirring within her as she awaits his response. For she has sensed the Divine in this encounter. She has felt the grace of God poured out in abundance, and tasted salvation here at the well. And, Jesus teachers her that she is no fool to hope: “I am he,” Christ says. *I am he.*

This encounter with the Messiah transforms her. Jesus has deemed this rejected woman worthy of revelation, worthy of love. And this emboldens her. Her thirst has been quenched; she has drunk deeply from the well of grace. So this woman leaves behind the jug she has brought to fetch water and returns to the community that has rejected her: “Come and see!” she says. Come and see the One who knows everything about me, and loves me still. Come and see the One who offers living water, who pours out grace in abundance! Come and see the Savior

³ Sermon Brainwave Podcast #530 – Third Sunday in Lent, www.workingpreacher.org.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See: Meda Stamper, “Commentary on John 4:5-42,” www.workingpreacher.org; Sermon Brainwave Podcast #530 – Third Sunday in Lent, www.workingpreacher.org.

of the world! Through her witness, through her testimony, this woman is restored to relationship with a community that heeds her call and comes to find the Savior of the world.

As the setting of this story suggested it would be, this *has* been a significant encounter at the well. And, not just for the Samaritan woman — who has tasted salvation — but for Jesus, himself. *Her* thirst has been quenched, and *his* hunger — satisfied. For when the disciples return with the food Jesus sent them to purchase, he no longer needs it. “My food is to do the will of the One who sent me and to complete his work.” ... My food is to break down barriers and to restore to relationship. My food is to encounter those who thirst for love and grace, and to offer living water. My food is to do the will of the One who sent me, because God so loves the world ...

Because God so loves the world, we who seek to follow Christ must also love the world. We are called to seek out those who are different, those we despise ... those whom the world deems unlovable or unworthy ... those who come to the well in the heat of the day because they are not welcome there any other time. Like Jesus, we are called to sit at that well, ready to offer compassion and hopeful that we might also be filled ...

Have you heard the story of Nora and her 82-year-old friend, Mr. Dan?⁶ It’s a piece of *good* news that’s been floating around lately ... The story of a powerful friendship that began with a surprising, but significant, encounter: Mr. Dan is a widower who knows all too well what it feels like to be buried under a mountain of grief. After his wife died, Dan fell into a deep depression. For months, he felt like he had no sense of purpose, no reason to live. Until a little girl name Nora reached out — literally and figuratively — to draw him into relationship. One day Dan was shopping at his local grocery store when — as the CBS News report puts it — this “*unapproachable* man was *approached* by a four-year-old girl.” Apparently Dan’s utter distaste for grocery shopping was evident on his face as he reached the end of the canned food aisle. That’s where he encountered Nora and her mom.

The four-year-old stood up in the shopping cart and reached out her arms. “Hi old person,” she said. “It’s my birthday today!” And then — much to her mother’s dismay— Nora demanded a hug from the grumpy stranger standing before her. Dan’s face lit up. “A hug? Absolutely!” So there, at the end of the canned food aisle, this grieving widower welcomed the embrace of an audacious little girl. The newfound friends introduced themselves and snapped a photo. And then, as the unlikely pair parted ways, Dan turned to Nora’s mom. With his lip quivering and his eyes filling with tears, he said: “You don’t know. This is the first time, for quite a while, that I’ve been this happy.”

Dan left that grocery store with his thirst quenched and his hunger satisfied in ways he could never have imagined when he set out to complete this dreaded chore. And, it seems, Nora did too. In the months since that surprising encounter, this unexpected friendship has blossomed into something that sustains, something life-giving. Nora and her mom visit their 82-year-old friend once a week. As Mr. Dan is the first to attest — this relationship, born of a surprising encounter at the well, has given him new life: “She opened me to a love that I didn’t know existed,” Dan said. “I’ve made room in my heart for a lot more.” Now, I don’t think four-year-old Nora set out to “sit at the well,” so to speak. But through her unfettered generosity, her bold love, she offered a gift of living water to someone desperately in need of Christ’s love.

There are plenty of wells in this world ... Some are tables, where you learn from sisters and brothers of other faiths. Some are community garden plots on our front lawn, where you meet the *Trolley Square* neighbor who has never felt comfortable walking *inside* the church. Some are seats on the bus where you sit with someone of another race and listen — and I mean *really* listen — when he talks about what it means to be black, or Asian, or Latino in this country. Some are chairs beside the fireplace at the retirement home, where you swap stories with the woman whose family never comes to visit ... Some are aisles in the grocery store.

⁶ “How a man’s chance encounter with a little girl gave him new purpose in life,” CBS News, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/a-more-perfect-union-widower-unexpected-friendship-with-little-girl-transforms-his-life/>

What is the well in your life? What place allows for an encounter that just might prove significant? What is the site that quenches another's thirst and satisfies your hunger? That propels *both* of you to go out and say, "Come and see the Savior of the world!"

Wherever the well is for you, we are called: To sit down and linger. To wait and watch for opportunities to offer grace. To look beyond stereotypes and barriers, and to invite another into relationship. To share the living water we have received from the Savior of the world, and to feast on the good news together ... And, with the Spirit's help, our words and deeds will reflect Christ to another. And, by the grace of God, Christ will be revealed to us too.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

God of grace and truth, help us to quiet our minds, help us to relax our muscles, help us to calm our souls. (Pause) As we breathe deeply, may we remember that your Spirit surrounds us and permeates us. (Pause) As we breathe in, fill us with your Spirit. (Pause) As we breathe out, may it clear our minds. (Pause) As we take fresh air in, fill us with your word. As we exhale, may it blow away our stale worries. (Pause)

God of mercy, our eyes are drawn to this woman at the well who has been rejected by five husbands and clings to a thin commitment from a sixth. She is a lonely figure drawing water at noon, as she must guard her self-image from the women who arrive early in the day. They relish the chance to unleash their anxieties on her and make her the scapegoat for their own weaknesses. They amuse themselves by shredding her ego with their biting words, their hostile stares, their cruel jokes. Lord, WE know how it feels to be the target of abuse, so our hearts are flooded with empathy for the indignities she must endure.

Loving God, when we become the bull's eye for slurs, remind us that we are your children whom you cherish. When we become the object of someone's ire, remind us that you treasure us as your own. Help us not to be oversensitive to the comments of others or to grant too much authority to their barbs. Remind us that unkind words often reveal more about the one who utters them. Malicious remarks may emanate from another's own unhappiness, insecurity, jealousy or trouble.

Eternal God, the Samaritan woman approached the well in need. At the bottom of the well was the spring-fed water she desired to quench her thirst. Lord, deep within us – down deep in our souls – your living water flows. It is the life-blood that pulses throughout every fiber of our being. It is your grace that embraces us and your forgiveness that cleanses us. It is your joy that bubbles up within us affirming that life is a blessing. It is the surge that pushes us to reach out to others.

God of compassion, we are grateful that Jesus reached out to this woman, and did not allow the wall of cultural barriers of Jew and Samaritan, Rabbi and woman, to silence him. Thank goodness he recognized her needs and reached out to her. Thank goodness he showed her respect and goodwill. Thank goodness he tapped your living water in her that sent her scurrying to share the good news with others.

Mighty God, there are many dehydrated souls in search of a well. There are many who are parched and dry – their souls so shriveled that they have become cynical and despairing. Help us to be like Jesus to them. Help us to be like Jesus. May your living water within us arouse our desire to drench others with love and sympathy, understanding, and acceptance. For we know that your living water within us is not to be held back, but to be poured out so that all may swim in your living water. Now, hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying, "**Our Father...**"