

***THE WAY IT IS***  
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University Congregational Church  
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**Reading: John 4: 5-30**

He had to pass through Samaria, and on his way came to a Samaritan town called Sychar, near the plot of ground which Jacob gave to his son Joseph and the spring called Jacob's well. It was about noon, and Jesus, tired after his journey, sat down by the well.

The disciples had gone away to the town to buy food. Meanwhile a Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." The Samaritan woman said, "What! You, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan woman?" (Jews and Samaritans, it should be noted, do not use vessels in common.) Jesus answered her, "If only you knew what God gives, and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." "Sir," the woman said, "you have no bucket and this well is deep. How can you give me 'living water?' Are you a greater man than Jacob our ancestor, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, he and his sons, and his cattle too?" Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water that I shall give him will never suffer thirst any more. The water that I shall give him will be an inner spring always welling up for eternal life." "Sir," said the woman, "give me that water, and then I shall not be thirsty, nor have to come all this way to draw."

Jesus replied, "Go home, call your husband and come back." She answered, "I have no husband." "You are right," said Jesus, "in saying that you have no husband for, although you have had five husbands, the man with whom you are now living is not your husband; you told the truth there." "Sir," she replied, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews say that the temple where God should be worshipped is in Jerusalem." "Believe me," said Jesus, "the time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship without knowing what you worship, while we worship what we know. It is from the Jews that salvation comes. But the time approaches, indeed it is already here, when those who are real worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. Such are the worshippers whom the Father wants. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." The woman answered, "I know that Messiah (that is Christ) is coming. When he comes he will tell us everything." Jesus said, "I am he, I who am speaking to you now."

At that moment his disciples returned, and were astonished to find him talking with a woman; but none of them said, "What do you want," or "Why are you talking with her?" The woman put down her water-jar and went away to the town, where she said to the people, "Come and see a man who has told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" They came out of the town and made their way towards him.

The story of the woman at the well is one of the most compelling in the New Testament. The richness of the history the story offers is fascinating. For example, Jacob's well is both an historical and geographical reality. Jacob's well is located in Tell Balatah, or Shechem as it is known in the Hebrew Bible. John's gospel calls it Sychar. You can visit this "Samaritan" community today, located in the modern West Bank. There remains a small community of Samaritans who can trace their ancestry to this ancient people. The location and historicity of Jacob's well is agreed upon by Jewish, Samaritan, Muslim, and Christian faithful. The well is possibly four thousand years old. It is fed both by rainwater and underground springs. It is said that the water is fresh and has a pleasing taste.

There was great tension between the Samaritans and Jews. The Samaritans claim their lineage from the tribes of Levi and Benjamin. They have their own Torah with some minor differences with the Jewish Pentateuch. Another major dispute was the place where God is truly found and worshipped. For the Israelites it was unquestionably Jerusalem. For the Samaritans it was Mt. Gerazim. The enmity between Jews and Samaritans was such that if a Jewish boy married a Samaritan girl his family would hold his funeral. This helps us understand the surprise that Jesus' audience would have felt when he told the parable of the Good Samaritan. Their question would have been, "Can anything good come out of Samaria?" Their assumption was that is impossible.

I share this history with you because it is important to our understanding of this story. The moral conflict of the woman at the well is both personal and social. It is not just a question of her sexual ethics but also her religious and cultural values. For

many of us growing up in the Protestant tradition the emphasis has been generally focused on her marital status and sexual proclivities. Sermons about divorce, adultery, or fornication would logically follow if you think this story is only about marital sex. Throw in the question of eternal life or living waters and the simplistic answer has always been that marital fidelity will get you to heaven, especially if your marriage has been hell.

I think this story is about “eternal life” and faith, but I think it has less to do with personal peccadilloes and the geography of heaven. Before we jump to another set of conclusions, let us explore the story as narrative for a moment.

Jesus was leaving Judea on his way to Galilee. There was a dispute about the baptisms of Jesus and those of John the Baptist. Of course the church has fought about the meaning of baptism ever since, just to let you know that some things never change. Jesus decided to get out of town. He was moving from the south to the north. In the middle lay Samaria. Some Jewish travelers would go around it for the reasons I explained above. That would make the trip longer and Jesus decided to take the direct route through Samaria and stopped in the city of Sychar.

The disciples of Jesus were undoubtedly uncertain about this route. I imagine that they had deep reservations about the place and the people. They were tired, dirty, sweaty, and hungry. It was lunchtime and they made the decision to look for a Walmart Supercenter in the hope of finding kosher meats, humus, figs, and dates. Jesus decided to remain at Jacob’s well. Perhaps he was tired of hearing their complaining and needed a break from his followers. Perhaps he wanted to spend time at Jacob’s well to meditate on the meaning of the place and his inheritance. Jacob,

you may recall, wrestled with God and permanently dislocated his hip in the process. He asked God for a blessing and God gave Jacob a new name, "Israel." Israel means "He who contended with God." For the rest of his life "He who contended with God" would limp. That is a lot for a preacher to think about. For Jesus, this well was a living reminder of his inheritance, a God and a people whose relationship was meant to be vital, even if sometimes contentious.

In the midst of this reverie a woman comes to the well. This in itself is a little curious. Women and children gather the water in the mornings and in the evenings. Why was this woman collecting water at noon? Perhaps it is because she was trying to avoid the usual gossip that she could not help but overhear. You can imagine that a woman with her reputation would be a threat to wives and the betrothed. Her ears would sizzle with the kinds of things that might be said about her.

Without introduction Jesus asks her for a drink of water. She cannot believe her ears. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" I have already mentioned the enmity between Jews and Samaritans. But any self-respecting rabbi would not be seen talking with an unaccompanied woman in public. His reputation would be disparaged immediately, especially given her social life. Jesus not only talks with the woman but also asks to drink from her cup. In the Ancient Middle East such a gesture is considered a form of intimacy. It is the kind of thing that family and close friends do with one another. Jesus is willing put his lips to the same vessel her lips have touched. From lips we take food. From lips we drink water. From lips we kiss those we love. From lips God breathed life into the soul of humanity. And of course with lips we drink water, an absolute necessity of life.

He suggests to the woman that he can offer her living water. He is speaking metaphorically but she is listening literally. She asks the obvious question of how he could draw any water, figuratively or literally. He has no bucket or rope to draw it with. The woman then calls into question the motives of Jesus. The first one is so obvious that she does not even need to ask it. The pickup line of Jesus is as pathetic as any she has ever heard. She has known lots of men and this one just does not seem the type. Perhaps he means something other than the obvious. Does he presume that he can offer her a greater gift than Jacob left? Can these living waters give a brighter future for God's people than the one left by that old irascible patriarch? "What's to lose," wonders the woman and she asks Jesus for these waters.

What are these living waters? Jesus tells her that these living waters well up from within her heart. Living waters are waters that cleanse and refresh are like a mill spring. They flow down the millrun to power a gristmill or electricity. From there they flow into a greater body of water, eternal life.

The term "eternal life," often found in John's gospel, is confused with some concept of an afterlife. It is thought to mean the place we go when we die, and for most people that means heaven or hell. It follows that many of these same people think that eternal life can only happen to them after they die. Now if you think about it that makes absolutely no sense. If it is eternal life I trust that means it has long preceded my existence and will far surpass my mortality. I also do not imagine that all of humanity has waited or is waiting for me to die so that eternity can begin.

More appropriately, eternal life is the life giving presence of God. God's grace and love are seething throughout all of life. The problem with most of us is that we

are not aware of it. Our hearts are clouded by the assumptions we make about God, usually the God of our fantasies or society or church. We cannot sense the Sacred One through the fog of our misdeeds, greed, and deceptions. Like the woman at the well we are obfuscating, rationalizing, and defending behaviors and attitudes that compromise our acclaimed values. We cannot feel the Master's hand on our shoulder because we are so deeply layered with the cloaks of anger and fear.

The Samaritan woman still thinks Jesus is talking about the kind of water that will free her from one more daily chore. Jesus is not willing to give her any idea until she does some truth telling. There are questions that he wants the woman to answer and he asks about her husband. He continues to pursue the matter until the whole truth is revealed. Then Jesus exposes the cultural and religious assumptions that Samaritans, and the Jews for that matter, were hiding behind. This was their identity and its prejudice was being exposed. It is clear that while the Samaritan might hide behind the religion of her culture, it had little bearing on her moral agency. The authentic worship of God comes from the human heart, immersed in truth and freedom.

The living waters that Jesus is offering to the Samaritan woman are not obscure. Living waters are not sacred secrets that only Jews, or Samaritans, or Christians, or Muslims have privileged access to. The only thing that was a barrier to the woman at the well was the lie that she was living. Jesus did not tell her a single thing that she did not already know about her life. He was not impressed with her awareness of the social, religious, and cultural tensions between Jews and Samaritans. He had heard it all before. Our religious differences are radically trivial. What is truly

important is whether we can open ourselves to God. Dare we risk full disclosure, exposing the truth about ourselves to the Source of all Truth?

Everyone in this room knows the limitations that we put on our relationships with our life partners when we are hiding something. We all know what it means to try to love when a big whopping lie overshadows our families. There is no treatment for alcoholism or substance abuse until we admit our addiction. All of the issues that destroy our homes, our work places, our communities, and our very selves will rot away the life we are desperately seeking if we do not tell the truth about ourselves.

The Samaritan woman can only see a new future for herself when the lies are brought down and the dust of deception is settled. It was not so much that Jesus revealed the truth about her. He also revealed a new future, one enriched with hope and possibility. The woman rushed into the town to tell her fellow citizens – the very ones who would talk about her at the well, who wouldn't allow their husbands within five hundred feet of her. It did not matter to her any more. She was free from the falsehood, the excuses, and the lies she even told herself. She was free for a living future. She now has an opportunity to discover what really gives life to her soul. Jesus invites her to ask the right questions that will strengthen her capacity to comprehend, anticipate, and activate her potential.

We actually have a modern process very much like this that we call “appreciative inquiry.”<sup>1</sup> The purpose is to find the best in people and recover what is life giving in their relationships, their homes, cities, and churches. Yes, the questions require us to be truthful about ourselves. Appreciative inquiry insists that we also ask

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<sup>1</sup> See David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, *A Positive Revolution in Change: Appreciative Inquiry* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005).

the right questions about the kind of options and choices we can make for a fulfilling and meaningful life.

We notice that this is not a process of judgment and condemnation. Jesus never expresses disdain or disrespect for the Samaritan. He does not threaten her with punishment or hellfire. Neither does he coddle her or gloss over her lifestyle. Appreciative inquiry does not seek to belittle or humiliate. By gentle questions we see the truth about ourselves. With profound appreciation for our humanity, we inquire about the kind of life and community that we can create for ourselves. As soon as we ask the questions the future begins to unfold before us.

Now let me also say that the lie or the distortion that often blinds us to the light is not necessarily something that is “sinful” or filthy. Sometimes the truth that we are not willing to see is about our health, our age, our sexual orientation, or our fears, even the fear of death.

When I am invited into the home of one who is dying I want to hear their story. Sometimes they will tell their story many times over several visits. Each telling is an effort to get closer to the truth. One of the remarkable things about the dying is that they know they are dying before their loved ones know it. We talk about important decisions that have to be made, ranging from the power of attorney, DNRs, and memorial service plans. We talk about the essential conversations they want to have before their death. We talk about what active dying looks like, the value of pain and anti-anxiety medications. We explore spiritual resources. We pray. We laugh and sit quietly when the words no longer work.



You might be thinking that this does not look like living waters or the potential of future fulfillment. But I assure you that even in dying I have witnessed the life giving presence of God, tending the dying ones with love and comfort. These have often been the most profound spiritual experiences I have ever known. I am always honored to be invited into such a future.

And every once in a while God teases me with the hint that living waters flow through such stories. Last Tuesday I had a conversation like the one I just described. At the close of our meeting I offered a prayer. I was at the side of the bed holding Pam's hand with my head bent. As I was praying the large cat, named Thomas, walked across the bed purring very loudly. He leaned over and put his forehead onto mine.

What is the church but a household of stories? We gather every Sunday to hear the stories of salvation and tell the stories of our lives. We heard one this morning about Jesus and the woman at the well. If I have done my job some of us found ourselves in the telling of this story. Like any story we are not always certain of the conclusion. As Eugene H. Peterson wrote, "Nothing in a skillfully told story is predictable. But also, nothing is without meaning – every detail, every word, every name, every action is part of the story."<sup>2</sup> The well of life begins to gurgle and flow in the sharing of our stories, every detail, every word, and every action. Meaning begins to unfold. The story washes and rinses and gives us a new vision of the future. These are the living waters that Jesus spoke of, the unconditional presence of God.

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), p. 118.