

## Sermon: The Special Woman at the Well

(based on John 4:5-42)

This story we shared in our Gospel reading today, is significant because it is the longest, single conversation Jesus has with anyone in the Bible.

Unlike many other conversations Jesus has with people, this one does not turn into a monologue. She holds her own quite well with considerable back and forth dialogue, seeking and responding. She was very bold and courageous to approach a man, let alone a Jewish man with her pointed questions.

Jews and Samaritans originated from the same heritage, but had very different worship and religious practices, gender and ethnic makeup. There was long-standing division of hostility and prejudice. This woman isn't named, all we know about her is what can be discerned at face value, her gender and ethnicity. John's author wants to make it clear that Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans. The picture is being painted that their identity and life experience couldn't be more diverse.

All these factors made this encounter frankly inappropriate during this period. Adding to this reality, Jesus could have easily avoided Samaria, which is now the West Bank. Most Jews traveled around Samaria, not through it, but Jesus was uninhibited by the cultural norms.

The disciples would have disapproved of this exchange. The fact that the disciples weren't present creates opportunity for the Samaritan woman and Jesus to talk candidly that likely wouldn't have transpired with an audience. Therefore, it was timely and perhaps fortunate that the disciples went to buy food. They sought food that nourishes the body, yet what Jesus offers this woman is spiritual food. She is seeking something so much more and he meets her at her point of need.

This text really shows Jesus' pastoral and counselor skills. He meets the Samaritan woman where she is at, answering her questions without preaching in a way that she couldn't understand and follow. He gives her enough deep, profound thoughts to ponder while still staying with her train of thought. He shows just how pastoral he was because the number of husbands she has is brought forth, yet he doesn't use this as an opportunity to judge and condemn her; rather he acknowledges her reality, showing that he really sees her.

Having 5 husbands would cause many people to judge, but as tradition and the law enforced, only men could divorce their wives in those days. She was likely widowed and divorced repeatedly some speculate because of barrenness.

We just don't know all the facts. Sometimes we are too quick to judge people at face value without knowing the full story, their struggles and past that inform the decisions they have made or that have been made for them, which was likely her case. Jesus gently reminds us through the Samaritan woman that there is no place for judgment.

Jesus' willingness to cross boundaries and engage in this discussion and open-hearted posture invite us to do the same. It also invites us into the grace that Jesus offers her, and that Jesus offers us. Jesus uses the most unlikely people that we, as humans, would not choose to do God's kingdom work and share the good news.

The story unfolds to reveal how God's kingdom work is at play. Just like the fishermen left their nets to follow Jesus and share the Gospel's good news, this woman left her water jar and headed for the city. Like the fishermen, this gesture is symbolic for what she is willing to leave behind as she heads toward change and newness. She shares this exciting encounter with her Samaritan people, although she is still uncertain, whether this is the Messiah. Her initial witness is tentative.

We learn that many believe because of the woman's testimony. She is new to faith and understanding. She doesn't have the full picture, yet in her enthusiasm she shares it and leads her people to the gospel.

Do you think that Jesus' Jewish disciples would have been effective in sharing the Gospel with the Samaritans? It seems unlikely with all the barriers that were in place. This Samaritan woman was able to point her people to Jesus and then over the course of the next couple days they came to believe him as the Saviour.

Her witness is invitational (come and see), not judgmental; it is within the range permitted by her experience; it is honest with its own uncertainty; it is for everyone who will hear. How refreshing. Her witness avoids triumphalism, peddling someone else's conclusions, packaged answers to unasked questions, thinly veiled ultimatums and threats of hell, and assumptions of certainty on theological matters.

She does convey, however, her willingness to let her hearers arrive at their own affirmations about Jesus, and they do: "This is indeed the Savior of the world."

This whole dialogue is centered around a well. Drawing water was a significant part of this Samaritan woman's survival and existence. This story is so transforming because Jesus takes the every-day elements, like water, that we can't live without and transforms them.

Jesus offers her living water, his water that will never wear out. Jesus' well never runs dry, his grace never fails, his truths never falter. In case you didn't let that sink in, let

me repeat this considering our fragile world: Jesus' well never runs dry, his grace never fails, his truths never falter.

Both the Old Testament and New Testament texts for this week focus on water and are so closely woven together. I invite you to read and study Exodus 17:1-7 for yourself. The Israelites are complaining, as usual, to Moses about unmet needs. This time it is water. They are so parched they believe they might die. Jump to our text in John. Jesus offers living water, his water that never runs dry.

How often do we forget to trust the physical and spiritual water is here and available for us? How often do we panic that the well will run dry? We live in very uncertain times without always having a clear path forward.

This text points us to our mission, found in and for Jesus Christ. Before unpacking and claiming that mission, we can point out significant names for Jesus in this text that help inform our awe, reverence and commitment to do mission in his name.

In this extract, Jesus is named as Messiah, the Savior of the world, Rabbi, meaning teacher, and is described as the gift of God and living water. God is named as the Father and God is named as spirit. Jesus also says I am. God and Jesus refer to themselves as I am more than 300 times throughout the Bible. We are reminded that Jesus is all these things, who he claims to be, and so much more than we can name and understand. I am period. I am all you need and should be all you want. With these worthy names in the forefront of our minds, let us look to what the text tells us about mission.

Jesus' mission was to carry out the mission and will of his Father. He didn't shirk or avert responsibility by avoiding Samaria, but instead went there, knowing this Samaritan woman and her people needed him to inform and change their lives. This situation reminds us of the cross; Jesus doesn't shirk going to the cross knowing that abiding by God's will, would change people and human history.

The book of John marked the commencement, not the finality of conversion, of missionary activity, since those who believed needed to be urged to live out their belief practically. Through this sincere dialogue in which Jesus engages the woman, he models the humbleness, his respect for the woman, and his ability to lead the woman and the disciples through their own "process of discovery". He meets them where they are at, but does not leave any of them there.

This passage also shows the challenge of mission, to engage and reorient people toward faith; it took two days for the Samaritans to confess faith in Jesus. The woman's example of mission is instructive; she marks one of the main tenets of discipleship by

bearing witness to Jesus, sharing her encounter with others eagerly, and bringing a whole Samaritan village to meet this man for themselves.

What is the mission expressed in this passage calling us to do? At a time when people continue to be scared and isolated and the reality of Covid may continue to become intensified, we are called like Jesus to not avert situations where we can tangibly help.

Theologically speaking who needs the living water that Jesus offers?

There are those who are still fearful of physical contact resulting from the Covid experience, but this is an opportunity to pick up our phones and connect with others in need. We can bring food to those homebound or offer fellowship through our chats.

Let us bring the Living Water of Jesus to our neighbors, our schools, our communities, in whatever way the Spirit is guiding us, bringing the spirit and truth of this living, holy "I am" to all. We just may be able to transform a whole Samaritan village in word and deed. Amen.