

Second Week in Lent

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John 4:5-30, 39-42

At that time Jesus 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 Jesus, "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 Jesus, "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, "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 Jesus, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you Samaritans will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we Jews worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 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. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

The woman said to Jesus, "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 Jesus' 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 someone who told me everything I have ever done! He can't be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him

Many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there 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 Savior of the world."

This Gospel story should put to flight any notion that Lent is to be a season of doom and gloom. It's a witty, clever, entertaining, and profoundly human story rich with layers of possible meaning. The commentaries offer up a feast of those multiple possibilities. But sticking just to the story itself, we come on Jesus being unconventional, indiscreet, rather naughty actually. It's really improper for him, a good Jewish man, to be talking all alone at a well with a Samaritan woman, while his associates have gone off to buy groceries at the local Costco.

The Bible describes other conversations at wells. In Genesis Isaac's servant finds Rebecca, a bride for his master, at a well. And Isaac's son Jacob waits by a well in Genesis 29 for Laban's daughter, Rachel, who, like the Samaritan woman in our story, arrives with her sheep at the well in midday, "in broad daylight," and Jacob promptly courts her, gallantly rolling the stone from the well's mouth, watering her flock, then

kissing her and breaking into loud sobs for joy at having found his wife to be.

Against that backdrop Jesus' conversation with the woman at Jacob's well is charged with provocatively seductive, even sexual, innuendo. Just place this conversation in a Bay Area singles bar:

Man: "How about a drink?"

Woman (feigning shock): "You, a nice Jewish man, are asking a drink from me, a Gentile woman?!!"

Man: "You don't know God's gift when he is standing in front of you. If you knew who it was that just asked you for a drink, you would have asked him for a drink, and he would have invited you up to his place for a drink you would never forget."

Woman: "Think you're pretty hot stuff, huh? You think I'd fall for that line? You know, Jacob loved this watering hole. He and his sons used to hang out here, and he handed it on to us. I suppose you think you can do better at your place than at Jacob's?"

Man: "Drink from this tap and you stay thirsty. Drink from my tap and you'll become a mountain spring that never gets dry."

Woman: "Hmmm! I want some of that. You know, it's not fun hanging out here every day, waiting for the right guy to come along."

Man: "Guy?! I'll bet you have a guy back home. Why don't you just go get him?"

Woman: "I don't have anyone regular right now."

Man: "Let me guess: You've had five serious relationships, and your current one is definitely not serious or regular. Am I right?"

When the disciples get back with their supplies, they are frankly scandalized by what they find, only barely restraining themselves from asking Jesus what he is up to. Even if Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman is not as sexually charged as my somewhat perverse reading of the text would suggest, it's certainly not consistent with the moral and cultural standards of his day.

In the Women's Bible Commentary Gail O'Day points out that the disciples' response to Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well reflects those traditional cultural and social conventions. But Jesus will not be limited by conventional restraints. His ministry is counter-cultural and inclusive; he breaks open all boundaries. And this means, not just that he a Jew will converse with a Samaritan, or that he a man and a rabbi will consort

alone with a woman, simultaneously breaking down the barriers of nation and gender. It means that Jesus' behavior and message cut against the grain of popular propriety, morality, and religious practice--then and now.

In contrast to the disciples, who seem shocked by Jesus' behavior, many traditional interpreters have been highly critical of the woman in the story. She is called a "five time loser" and a "tramp," and is commonly regarded as something of an airhead. And yet, as Professor O'Day points out, this woman is no airhead. She boldly stays in the conversation with Jesus despite his odd flights into obscure metaphor, she accurately recognizes him as a prophet, and, identifying him as a person of substance, she engages him in what is perhaps the first serious theological conversation to occur in this Gospel. Her questions, anyway, are more astute than those posed by Nicodemus, who is described in chapter 3 of John as a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews.

And in contrast to the disciples' offense at Jesus' behavior and the commentators' mean muttering about the woman's morality, we do not find in this story the slightest trace of judgment or condemnation from Jesus. Of course, he does speak the truth. To speak the truth is not to judge, but to love. To speak the truth is to take another seriously. In this case Jesus attends to this woman so intently that she knows she is being seen for the specific person she is, and not as the false self she may display or the stereotype she may seem to fit. And she is accepted as that person. Jesus accurately mirrors back to her what she knows to be true about herself. But truthfulness expressed out of unconditional love produces intimacy in a relationship and enormous relief and freedom for the partners in that relationship. And she seems to take his response to her in just that way, for after his comment about her five past husbands and her present relationship she doesn't apologize or become defensive or grovel or flee; without missing a beat she engages Jesus in discussion about the theological disputes between her people and his. Then, when she returns to her people, the part of Jesus' conversation with her that sticks with her and seems really to matter to her is that he "told her everything she had ever done." This is awesome but not frightening. Her manner doesn't suggest that her style of life has been exposed and doom is about to fall on her, but that a wonderful, bright new age may have arrived, maybe as Jesus has suggested, a time when all people can worship God in spirit and in truth.

I guess I want to propose that Lent is not about gloom and doom or guilt and shame. I want to propose that it is about spirit and truth.

So much of our lives we spend putting up a front before others and even before ourselves, trying to look more intelligent and knowledgeable, more noble and pure, more acceptable than we actually believe we are. We are tempted to fabricate this false self in classes, in endorsement interviews, in our families, in our congregations, in our public moments and even in the locked closets of our own most private lives. Our fear is that God and others will judge us as the disciples judged Jesus and the commentators have judged this

Samaritan woman at the well.

Especially at a seminary we are easily enough lured into endless theological disputes. We wonder, Is it O.K. to think this thought? Can I associate myself with this person? Do I dare admit to these feelings, own these attitudes, acknowledge these questions, entertain these doubts? It wears a person out to live looking over your shoulder, filtering your thoughts, guarding your words, restraining your behavior in order to look theologically kosher, to keep up the pretense of orthodoxy, to sustain the illusion of doctrinal purity.

Lent is an invitation to give up all that. Jesus says, you worry and fret about holy cities and holy hills, but I tell you the valleys will be raised and the hills and mountains will be lowered, these distinctions will become irrelevant, and worship will no longer divide but gather up people in life expanding spirit and truth.

Especially in the church we are easily enough caught up in intensely felt moral questions. We wonder, Am I a good enough person? If I want to be taken care of at least as much as I want and feel able to care for others, am I a good enough person? If I feel good about myself and proud of my accomplishments, should I judge myself arrogant and can I really call myself a good enough person? If I am angry at anything or anyone; if I feel hate, contempt, or disgust toward others; if I am envious and self-protective; if I lack discipline; if I eat and drink more than I need; if I covet designer clothes, gourmet food, classy cars; if I would rather lie in bed than read my texts or write my papers, am I a good enough person? If I feel sexual feelings and think sexual thoughts even when reading the Bible or attending the Eucharist, am I a good enough person?

We easily enough burden ourselves with the guilt and shame that come from doubts about our moral character.

But Lent is an invitation to give up all that. Jesus knows and can tell us everything we've ever done, and he doesn't judge or condemn us any more than the woman at the well. Instead he just offers us God's gift, living water, life lived not in fear, denial, and defensiveness, but in spirit and in truth.

Jesus didn't burden the woman at the well. He lifted her load and relieved her of her burden. He liberated her. The fact that she left her water jug behind is evidence that she had tasted the living water flowing from Jesus. She had received from him a taste of what it is like to live and worship God in spirit and truth.

And, of course, so have we. Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life, life overflowing, life in its fulness." In our baptism we have been immersed in that spring of water gushing up to eternal life. The truth conveyed in that act is that a good and loving God has breathed into us God's own life, claimed us as his own, taken us under her wings, promised to hold us, protect and sustain us. Today again we gather in celebration

of this life with God. As at the wedding at Cana, water once again becomes wine, and wine conveys to us once again the overflowing, gracious, vital life of God. This is worship in spirit and truth, to taste again and know for ourselves that this Jesus, who knows everything we have ever done, has only love for us and offers us, especially in Lent, life abundant gushing up like an eternal spring of clear, cool, refreshing water.