

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, ¹⁴but 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.” ¹⁵The 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.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” ¹⁷The 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!” ¹⁹The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But 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. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

²⁷Just 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?” ²⁸Then 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?” ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him. ³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” ³²But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” ³³So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” ³⁴Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵Do 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. ³⁶The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ ³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.” ³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They 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.”

Living God, through the reading of the Scriptures and by the power of your Spirit, may we hear for ourselves the good news, and believe, because of your Word, that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. Amen.

I think it best if I begin with a little history: Around the year 920 B.C.E., 10 tribes of the Jewish people from the northern territory seceded from Judah. These 10 tribes became known as the Northern Kingdom of Israel, with their capital, in the city of Samaria. The remaining 2 tribes, centered in Jerusalem with its temple, became known as the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

Two hundred years later, in 720 B.C.E., Assyria invaded the Northern Kingdom of Israel and exiled many of the Jews living there. The Northern Kingdom (a.k.a. Samaria) was then repopulated with peoples from 5 different countries (see 2 Kings 17:24). These “foreigners” brought the worship of their pagan gods and eventually intermarried with the Samaritan Jews who were left behind after the exile.

In the language of symbol we might say that the Jews of Samaria in the Northern Kingdom, embraced 5 “husbands” as they intermarried with people from 5 foreign countries. So when we learn that the Samaritan woman had 5 husbands, we can begin to see that John was using her to represent the whole Northern Kingdom, which in Jesus’ day was known as Samaria.

For those in the Southern Kingdom who kept themselves pure by refusing, for example, to intermarry with foreigners, the woman of Samaria represented one of the main issues in the rift between the Jews of the north and the Jews of the south. The Samaritans were considered an impure, mongrel race by the Jews of the Southern Kingdom, who, in their quest for purity, wanted nothing to do with Samaritans, period!

And when we consider the years of warfare and rivalry between the northern and southern kingdoms, and all the prejudice and hate, animosity and bitterness, it is easy to see that there was both an emotional and spiritual barrier between the 2 kingdoms; and they were separated, figuratively, by a very high wall.

It is extraordinary then, that John crafts this story of a pure Jew of the Southern Kingdom – Jesus – meeting a Samaritan *woman* of the Northern Kingdom.

And here's another extraordinary thing about the way John has composed his gospel: remember in last week's lesson Nicodemus came to meet Jesus at night; it is important that we see his story in relation to the story of the Samaritan woman.

Nicodemus, of course, was male and we know his name – the Samaritan woman, obviously female, remains nameless.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night – the Samaritan woman encountered Jesus in the bright light of noon day.

Interestingly, they were both tripped up in their attempts to understand what Jesus was saying literally: Nicodemus was trying to understand being born again by reentering his mother's womb; the Samaritan woman was wondering where Jesus would get the living water without a bucket.

The stories, however, end quite differently: As far as we can tell, Nicodemus was left in the dark metaphorically and was unable to receive the gift of the Spirit that Jesus was offering. Nicodemus does appear two more times in John's gospel, but it is unclear if he ever became born again in the Spirit.

For her part, the Samaritan woman pressed forward with her questions and ultimately perceived that Jesus was a prophet. She was open to, and received, the living water. She was changed. She became a disciple in both word and deed, and returned to her village to share what she had been given; the living water – gift of eternal life.

It is also very important to acknowledge the setting of John's account; John has Jesus meet the Samaritan woman *at a well*. This is very significant because a well was a special meeting place. Those Jewish listeners of John's gospel account would pick up on it immediately, and I can imagine that it caused something like a mental "double-take."

A well, as a meeting place, would undoubtedly spark the memory of the patriarch, Abraham, sending his oldest and most trusted slave on

a mission to find a wife for his son, Isaac, in the land of his kinsmen. At a well in Nahor, Abraham's slave met Rebekah (Genesis 24:1ff). He asked her for a drink, and she gave him water, then Rebekah watered the servant's camels. That was the sign! Isaac's mate was found!

Jesus met the Samaritan woman at a well, and what did Jesus say to her? "Give me a drink." The recollection of the mating of Isaac and Rebekah would certainly come to mind for those who heard this gospel being read.

The well as a mating place comes up again after Isaac and Rebekah give birth to Esau and Jacob. Esau married a foreign woman, but Isaac, by that time an old man, commanded Jacob to seek a wife among their kinsmen. So guess where Jacob went to find a wife? Yes, to a well, where he met Rachel (Genesis 29:1ff). This time he watered her sheep. She ran home to tell her family, and they came out to meet Jacob. We should not miss the similarity of the Samaritan woman going back to her village community inspiring her people to come out to the well to meet Jesus.

And if you like things in units of three, in Exodus 2:15ff we have the story of Moses finding his wife, Zipporah, who was one of 7 daughters of a Midian priest. Yes, he met the seven sisters at a well, and watered their sheep for them.

John has set the stage; a well is the place where marriages are made. That being the case, can you imagine the disciple's chagrin when they came back and found Jesus talking with a woman in public...*at a well!* They were astonished.

Through this remarkable story Jesus is shown revealing God's plan for the kingdom of heaven on earth. The suggestion of a marriage between Jesus and the Samaritan woman who had 5 husbands speaks to Jesus' ministry of gathering all people into one; breaking down the barriers that divide, and healing the wounds that separate. The new Israel which Jesus proclaimed would be completely inclusive; Jew and Gentile, men and women, slave and free; all becoming one in Jesus, the Lord of living water.

In truth, John's gospel cannot be properly understood when read literally. When we read it literally we are easily get side-tracked by

wondering, for example, about the Samaritan woman's past; why 5 husbands? Was she an adulterer? Was she barren? Was she widowed? Was she divorced? John's text is not concerned with any of these possibilities. What is key, however, is that she stood for a people who were outsiders to the Jewish community centered in Jerusalem and the temple.

John's gospel shares a radically inclusive message – the radical good news – that Jesus breaks through every barrier that comes between people. Jesus offers the living water to everyone; men and women, saint and sinner, free and slave. In Jesus, barriers of race, culture, language, religious practice, or any other difference come crashing down. Jesus' prayer is that they may all be one (John 17:21).

This passage is particularly challenging because it shines a light on the way we tend to be exclusive by judging each other. The light of Christ also reveals our predisposition for putting people in boxes, for creating in-groups and out-groups; it reveals the racism, prejudice and hate that still lingers just under the surface.

I know I'm as guilty as the next person, but here's what I'm trying to do: I'm working at paying attention to how I react to things I hear, and people I meet. When I catch myself avoiding certain people, I need to ask, "Why am I doing that?" When, in my heart, I condemn, or belittle people for things they say, wouldn't it be better for all concerned if I could try to understand that person instead? And when I judge others negatively for what they have done, I need to stop and take a close and honest look *at myself*, because, most likely, I have done the very same thing!

Jesus offered the living water to the Samaritan woman; she left her water jar behind and went off to share the good news. Jesus offers that same living water to you and to me. So I ask myself, can I leave my prejudice behind and be a disciple of the good news too? Please pray for me, and I will pray for you. By the grace of God may we all take on the heart of Jesus.

Holy Lord, none of us is perfect; you already know that, and yet we must confess it. Help us to leave behind the things that separate us from each other; our pride, inflated egos, our holier than thou habit of being judgmental. Grant us your mercy; give us your living water, so

that we may become a blessing, not a curse, to our sisters and brothers. O Lord, in your mercy hear our prayer. Amen.

Bonus:

How does the following story relate to today's scripture lesson?

THE FENCE

Two brothers were living on adjoining farms. They got along well for years, trading machinery, labor, materials as each had need. Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding and grew into an awful rift. One day it exploded and the brothers fell into a long and seemingly endless silence.

Then one morning the older brother heard a knock on his door. When he answered it he found a man standing before him with a carpenter's toolbox. Indeed, this man was a carpenter and told the older brother that he was looking for work. The older brother was about to say no, but then paused a moment. Then he turned back to the carpenter and said, yes, he did have something that the man could do.

The older brother then told the carpenter about the feud he'd been having with his neighbor, and then confessed it was actually his younger brother. He pointed over to the property line between the two farms. "Last week my brother took his bulldozer and spent 2 days cutting that deep ditch down the line between us. Now it has filled with water. Every time I look at it my blood pressure goes off the chart. Here's what I'd like you to do; I want you to build me a solid fence about 8 feet tall so I won't ever have to look at that ditch, or him again."

The older brother provided all the materials for the man to build the fence, and told him he could start work first thing the following morning. That next morning the older brother had to leave and be away all day picking up a piece of equipment he had bought out of state. The carpenter told the older brother not to worry; he

understood the situation and he would take care of it. He had everything he needed.

Amazingly the carpenter finished the job and was picking up when the older brother finally got home that night. But when he walked around the farmhouse to see the fence – there was no fence. Instead, the man had built a bridge over the water filled ditch.

The older brother began to fume, and as he did he looked up and saw his younger brother walking down toward the new bridge. The younger assumed that his older brother had forgiven him and the new bridge was a sign of reconciliation, so he was coming to apologize for being so pig-headed as to bulldoze a ditch between them.

As the younger was crossing over the bridge, the older realized that their feud was senseless, and that life was too short to waste it on anger and grudges.

The carpenter picked up his tool box and said to himself, “I guess my work is done here,” and headed down the driveway.