

Rev Hay's Sermon for 3/15/2020

The Samaritan Woman at The Well: John's Version

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well is the longest conversation in the Gospels, and it's a story, rich in symbolic meaning and a powerful message. It's also a bit strange and slightly mysterious.

For one thing, the facts are strange in an Alice in Wonderland sort of way. What's wrong with this picture we might find ourselves saying at first reading. Jesus, a Jew, engaging a lone woman in conversation, and her a Samaritan woman. The woman coming to the well at midday in the scorching sun. Who would not come early in the morning or late in the day when the sun is blazing overhead. Further strangeness in Jesus having almost psychic insights into the woman's life, and she in turn having the insight to understand she was in the presence of someone extraordinary, a prophet as she decides He must be.

She does not recognize him, and he begins to puzzle her. He puzzles her by the mere fact that he, a Jewish man, seeks a conversation with her, a Samaritan woman. He was crossing two social boundaries at once, for Jews had long standing theological disputes with Samaritans which made them ongoing enemies. They disagreed on worship practices, too. And, secondly, a man would never engage a woman in conversation such as this:

"Give me a drink," Jesus says. Here, Jesus the man, expressing ordinary human needs. "Give me a drink," he says here at the well. Later in his life, he would ask his disciples, "Do you have anything here to eat?"

Jesus could be hungry and thirsty. We sometimes forget in our hyper-spiritual age that Jesus was truly human, and moments like this remind us. There were days when Jesus craved the same physical satisfactions that we do. Needing to get away from the throngs somewhere quiet, on his own, to get his head together, like a famous person hounded by the paparazzi. On this occasion, He was simply hot and thirsty.

It was noon on that day at the well, and Jesus was craving for a drink and so He engages her in conversation over it as He asks her for one. Soon he also begins to speak of water, living water, that will leave a person never having to thirst again.

And as they talk, great insights emerge, making the conversation take an intense turn. First, go get your husband," Jesus orders her.

"I have no husband," the Samaritan woman says. I have chosen and chosen, but I have no husband.

In other words, she's made some bad choices, and who among us has not made bad choices of some kinds in life, so we feel for her, her embarrassment and her likely pain. She's a woman with a bad reputation then, she's something of a scarlet woman, a husband stealer perhaps. She knows the locals don't like being around her so she stays out of their way. Chooses her moment to go out to avoid them, even drawing water when she knows no one is around.

When Jesus declares that the man she is with is not her husband, the Samaritan woman realizes she is being asked to face up to truth itself. "I perceive you are a prophet!" she exclaims.

A prophet speaks truth, but a prophet can also scare us with truth. And here is Jesus, offering living water, but that water is packaged in a truth that makes us reveal ourselves as we truly are.

Water. The stuff of Baptism. How much water is needed for a valid baptism? Well in the words of one theologian, baptism needs as much water as it takes to drown in. Baptism requires death. Baptism means dying to the old life and being born into new life.

"Sir, give me a drink. Give me some of this living water." The request of the Samaritan woman needs to be our request today. Give me something that will stay with me, that will keep me alive.

This story is loaded with symbolism and dramatic irony which is plentiful in John's gospel. Think of the other time, not long after this incident, that the scriptures record that Jesus is thirsty. It's when Jesus is about to die on the cross. His last words are "I thirst,"

But for now, this encounter between a physically thirsty Christ (God/Man) and a spiritually thirsty Samaritan woman (You/Me), connects us with finding truth in our own lives today.

* **First**, Christ meets us where we are. The meeting at the well was a "chance encounter" - only for the woman. With God there are no "chance encounters" -- but only the chance to encounter Christ anytime and anywhere. He met her where she was. Alone at the well which she visited when she knew no one else would be there, she'd worked out when it was best to avoid encountering the townsfolk who shunned her constantly.

* **Second**, Christ accepts us *as we are*. Jesus didn't rebuke or denigrate the woman. He doesn't raise the matter of her many husbands until late in the conversation.

* **Apart from all that**, there is no suggestion of the Jew Jesus scorning the Samaritan. Instead he has a gift for her and for anyone who will receive it. "If you knew who I was, you would ask for living water."

* **Interestingly** she *doesn't* see Him for who He is. She believes Him to be a prophet, but not the Messiah. Much as today people miss out on the gift for not knowing or accepting what Christ offers..

The truth at the heart of this story is the gift of love which is given freely for us to receive wherever we are in life. For one rejected Samaritan woman 2000 years ago it was by the town well on a hot and dusty day. For you and me it's anywhere, any time, any place we are willing to stop and say, "Lord, give me this water that I may never thirst again!"

Thirst is one of the most powerful spiritual symbols in all of scripture. Just as thirst draws the whole of our physical being to a longing for water to assuage it, so a spiritual void will draw our spirits into a search for deeper meaning for our lives. "*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*" says the psalmist. And again in Psalm 143: "I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land."

On Good Friday, on the cross, Jesus' thirst will be our thirst. "I thirst," Jesus said, as He takes the thirst of the entire human condition to God. And the true quenching of our thirst will come from encountering God in spirit and in truth.

God provides us with living water. He will raise us up to new life, just as He raised up Jesus from the dead, .

Let us with the determination of the woman at the well, long for our thirst to be quenched by drinking deeply from the draughts of living water, the blood of Jesus poured out freely for the salvation of the world.

AMEN