

Drawing Water from the Well of Faith”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, March 19, 2017
Third Sunday in Lent

Reading from Scripture: John 4:5-30, 39-42

So 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 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.) 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 him, '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 him, '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 him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers 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 him, '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 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?' Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

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

John 4:5-50, 39-42

Will you join with me in prayer? Gracious God, you offer us your word. Through it you invite us, you teach us, you lead us, you guide us. May we, together, wrestle and consider and learn from the word you have put before us this day. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

In the Tuesday morning book study group, we are discussing a book by Ken Bailey on Psalm 23. In the book he leads us on a journey, inviting us to see how this Psalm is woven throughout the Bible. He takes us from Jeremiah to Ezekiel to the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, and I think he wants us to understand that Psalm 23 can be viewed as a metaphor for life and faith.¹ And I think it echoes in today's lesson as well. The reading this morning speaks to us of Jesus like a shepherd seeking out someone who is lost. She gives him water from a well that is a still body of water. He, in turn, offers her the waters of new life. He offers her living waters. And she responds in a manner that says *my cup runneth over*. Now as often happens with Jesus, there are some unexpected things that happen in the story. The first clue is that Jesus and his disciples willingly enter Samaria. That's something that Jews normally wouldn't do because the two groups don't associate with each other. The origins of these tensions are from the time of the Babylonian exile. Most Jews were taken from their homeland and exiled to Babylon. But there were those who remained behind. And when those in exile returned, it was not surprising that over the many years, the two groups had moved in somewhat different directions. One of the things they see differently is where to worship God. For the Jews returning from exile, it was Mount Zion and Jerusalem. The Samaritans believed that Mount Gerazim was the holy mountain. And each group disputed the purity of each other's Jewishness. But as Christians with centuries of disagreements we can kind of understand how that happened, can't we?

So Jesus deliberately leads the disciples into Samaria and when they arrive, he sends them into town to get food. And tired and thirsty, Jesus sits by the well as if waiting for someone to give him a drink. A woman arrives there at noon in the heat of the day. That's a very unusual time to come and get water. As if this wasn't strange enough, Jesus, who is a rabbi, is willing to talk with this woman alone. And he asks her for water. She is shocked and says, *I'm a woman, a Samaritan, and you are asking me for water?* And that's when the conversation shifts. He says, essentially, *Do you know who I am. If you did, you would ask for living water.* Now she knows the well water is still water and he is offering something different. So a theological conversation starts and they go back and forth and then it becomes personal. He says, *Go, call your husband.* Now is this a trick statement? She has no husband now, she has had five and now she lives with someone else. And somehow he knows all of this. Some scholars feel that the five husbands represent five tribes that were considered unfaithful. But maybe it's more than that.

The woman is at the well at noon. Is she avoiding running into other people? Is she an outcast? So maybe it's both. She is not only a Samaritan but likely an outcast among her own people. And she is stunned because he knows her history. And yet he still offers her the living water. Is this water going to quench a different kind of thirst—the thirst of loneliness? What he offers her are gifts of hope and new life and healing. And by his actions he breaks down the walls that she thinks divides them. The conversation returns to theology again, as if you are with a bunch

of theology students in some kind of living room, you'll find that happens all the time. But, regardless, he welcomes her as an outcast. But she is also a Samaritan. She knows that their people disagree about where to worship God, and Jesus again challenges her perception.

Last week we heard about the struggle of Nicodemus, a pharisee, trying to understand what Jesus was telling him and he keeps interpreting it literally. But this woman seems to grasp the bigger picture. Jesus tells her that where God is worshipped is as not important as who is worshipped. And then he reveals that he is the Messiah, clearly one who has come for the Samaritans as well. She now realizes that the living water is not only for her but for all her people and that's the turning point. Knowing the joy of feeling forgiven, she runs to town to share with the others what she has heard. And they can see a difference. She is so transformed, they come to see it for themselves and they, too, come to believe.

I think this story becomes one of welcome and not differences. Jesus senses faith that is deep and real, is expressed by the heart and not through rules. He offers understanding of the struggles and doubts of life and in spite of her being an outcast, she is encouraged by him, not condemned. And so he tears down the dividing line of purity and rigid lines of belief.

As I thought about this, a story came to mind that I have shared before. It makes a similar point. It's about a woman named Lisa who shared in a sermon the story of her struggle of faith. She said I had finished the whole year of confirmation class and now each of us had to come and meet with the pastor and I sat outside of his study and I was anxious and I was worried and finally it was my turn. He and I chatted about what I had learned, what the class had done, all kinds of things, and finally he smiled at me and said, *Oh, we've reached that point. Do you think you are ready to answer the questions of confirmation and join the church?* I whispered, *No, I don't think I can.* And the pastor looked startled, *Why not?* Lisa said, *I looked at him and said, Well, there's a lot about being a Christian that I'm comfortable saying 'yes' to but not all of it. I have some questions and I have some doubts.* He said, *Well, what are they?* She said, *Well, when we say the Apostles' Creed, there is something in it I don't believe in.* And he said, *What is that? Born of the Virgin Mary, I just don't believe in it.* And he looked at me for a moment and I could tell he was smiling a smile of genuine understanding. *Well, you know, Lisa, there is a part of that creed that's difficult for me.* I was surprised: *Really? What is it?* And he said, *Well, the forgiveness of sins.* And I was shocked, *But that's the best part! I know that God really forgives me when I confess my sins.* The pastor said, *I know and I tell people that all the time and I believe it for them, but for some reason I really can't accept it for myself.* And we sat there quietly for a while and finally he said, *You know what, Lisa? Let's make a deal. When we say the Apostles' Creed, I will say the virgin birth really loud for you, and then you say, the forgiveness of sins really loud for me and maybe we can help each other.* And I smiled and I said, *Okay, it's a deal.* And then I reached out to the pastor, who was not only the pastor but my father, and I gave him a hug and I said, *I know God forgives you, Daddy. I just know it.* Lisa closed by saying, *I joined the church, I became a pastor myself, because someone showed me that doubts and struggle and questions are part of what it means to have real life in faith.*

I think in the midst of the stories of Lisa and the woman at the well, we hear struggles of doubt and wondering if we matter. We hear that in spite of different perspectives we can be woven together in community by the power of the Holy Spirit and the gift of honest sharing. For both women, feelings of being an outsider were erased by an act of welcome. Differences would not

divide them. Jesus could unite them. The Apostle Paul says that it is unity not uniformity that binds us together in Christ. If we are willing to tear down the walls that exist sometimes only in our own imaginations, we can encourage one another and build up the body of Christ.

When I thought about this I recalled that over the years I have had different people say to me, *sometimes I miss saying the creeds*. And then they would add, *But then again I don't agree with everything they say*. They believe, yet like Lisa, there are things that they struggle with and wonder about. Maybe we miss saying them because the creeds are something familiar that binds us together. And as I was talking about this, a colleague of mine shared a story about going to England and visiting his son. One of the things they did while there was visit a chapel from the tenth century. Can you imagine? The tenth century. He said, *As I sat there I noticed that the Apostles Creed was chiseled into the wall, a creed written centuries before the chapel was even built. And it struck me then, in a profound way, how these words have been uttered for over a thousand years. Words said in community that bind us together with millions of saints who have come before us. He said, There in that place the creed took on new power and meaning. I realized we did not have to agree on everything it said or that we said, but there was power in saying it together, powerful in ways that only the Spirit can make us feel. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, The Spirit, like the wind, blows where it will and can bind us up together in the most unexpected times and places.*

I think unity and not uniformity is one of the most powerful gifts from Paul. It reminds us that as the hymn says in spite of many a conflict and many a doubt, still we come and we are welcome. We come by the power of the Spirit to find community in the gift of sharing the life and teachings of Jesus. Through the power of his teachings and the depth of his love, we find community. We can say come-unity through the Son who makes us one. Amen.

1. *"The Good Shepherd" by Kenneth Bailey*