

## **The Woman at the Well**

John 4 by Patty Friesen (May 10, 2015)

In our gospel reading in John 4, Jesus has traveled through the heat of the desert and at noon comes thirsty to Jacob's well in Sychar. But he realizes that he has no cup or bucket with which to draw water. The disciples have gone off to buy food and he is left alone. But someone else is out in this desert heat, and she's carrying a bucket. She may be the last person on earth Jesus want to encounter, because not only is she a woman, but a woman with a shady past and a Samaritan. By custom, Rabbi Jesus ought not to even speak with her in public, let alone drink from her Samaritan bucket.

Whereas Rabbi Nicodemus came to visit with Jesus in Jerusalem under the cover of night, Jesus encounters this woman in a small hot dusty town in Samaria in broad daylight. There is no nighttime leisure for theological exchange and reflection. There is only this woman, and she is insolent, defensive, strong and determined. She is alone, on her own to provide for her basic need of water for cooking and washing. There is no father, husband, brother or son around to protect her. There is no group of women to meet at the well, to joke and laugh with and share her sorrows. She is alone. She needs somebody to care about her.

Jesus is also alone. Jesus needs fresh water to drink. In the desert at noon, with all distraction stripped away, all shadows erased, the light shines bright enough for these two strangers to discover that they need each other. As they are transfigured in the light of the noonday sun, each enemy sees the face of a friend. Distance dissolves into relationship. Enmity melts into mutuality. They glimpse a spiritual wholeness, a new healing reality.

Here begins one of the most delightful and intimate interactions between Jesus and a person ever recorded in the Gospels. Only the Gospel of John has it. The other gospels may not have known about it or may have been too embarrassed to record Jesus' encounter with this woman. Jesus initiates their interaction by violating all social custom and reversing a power differential and asking her for a drink of water. The woman responds by mocking him for his impropriety. Jesus replies that his asking for water doesn't come out of his own need for her water but out of her need for his living water. Again she mocks him by saying that he has no bucket and does he have water that is better than their ancestor Jacob's water? Jesus responds by saying that he is the source of the living water of which no one will ever thirst again. The woman is intrigued and asks him for this living water.

Then Jesus pulls a fast one and tells her to go get her husband. She coyly replies that she has no husband. Jesus confirms that in fact she has had five husbands and the man she currently living with is not her husband. The woman is stunned and admits that he must be a prophet but she quickly changes the topic from her personal life. She challenges Jesus about his Jewish beliefs that God can only be worshipped in Jerusalem, while the Samaritans have found God on their holy mountain Gerizim. Jesus replies, "Woman, believe me, the time is coming when it won't matter where people worship – only that they do worship God in spirit and in truth." The woman responds that she knows that the time is coming when the Messiah will come for both the Jews and the Gentiles.

In an extremely rare occasion, Jesus reveals that he is the Messiah. He doesn't even let the disciples talk about that, but he reveals himself to this woman and she

believes him. She's so excited about it that she leaves her water jar by the well and runs back to town to tell people about him. And the townspeople went out to see Jesus for themselves and invited him to stay with them for 2 days and he did so. Verse 39, "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, and many more believed because of his word."

Jesus models a barrier-breaking relationship of mutuality and compassion. The woman is bold enough to both remind Jesus of what separates them – he a Jew and she a Samaritan – and of what connects them – their ancestor Jacob. She is audacious and spars verbally with this strange man. Like all the other women in the Bible, she is a woman with *huzpah*. Jesus appreciates women with *huzpah*. In their exchange, she becomes a changed person. From someone who sneaks alone to the well, she is suddenly engaging the townspeople, her mockers and persecutors, face to face. She is telling them about this encounter at the well and telling them that they need to meet this man Jesus. And there must be something dramatic and believable about her enthusiasm because all of a sudden, the townspeople believe her and follow her advice – she whom they've previously rejected. Now she is suddenly the local heroine, the one who introduced the town to Jesus.

The early Christian catacombs have pictures of the Samaritan woman at the well with Jesus. She became a symbol of baptism for the early church. Jesus offered her living water and she drank of it. In this way the early church believed she was the first person that Jesus baptized. To this day, the Samaritan woman is honored in many cultures. In southern Mexico, La Samaritana is remembered on the fourth Friday in Lent, when water flavored with chilacoyota, tamarindo, jamaice and horchata is given to

commemorate her gift of water to Jesus. The Russian Orthodox know her as Svetlana, which means “Equal to the apostles,” and she is honored as an apostle and martyr with a feast day.

In the brilliant writing of the Gospel of John, we are moving from Rabbi Nicodemus who under the cover of darkness, remains in the darkness of doubt to the Samaritan woman at the well, who in broad daylight sees Jesus as the Light. Next week, there will be light revealed to the eyes of the blind man and the clincher will be when Lazarus is brought out of the darkness of the tomb into the light of day.

In today’s encounter, Jesus describes himself with the metaphor of living water. Whether or not the Samaritan woman got the hint, a Jewish audience would surely know that the Torah was referred to as living water. Psalm 1, blessed is the one who studies Torah for they are like a tree planted by living water. Sirach 24, “Torah fills us with wisdom like rivers overflowing their banks.” Proverbs 13, “the teaching of Torah is a fountain of life.” Proverbs 14, “The fountain of Torah is a gushing stream.” Jesus is describing himself as living Torah, as the fountain of wisdom, the stream that gives life forever if people drink from it.

It is a radical claim to make that Torah no longer stands on its own but is fulfilled and lived out in the person of Jesus the Christ. If Jesus is Torah personified then the Torah or living water of God is for Samaritans as well as Jews and women as well as men and for people of any kind of marital status as well as for celibates. Jesus blows any illusion that we have the corner on the truth clean out of the water. Jesus forces us to recognize that uncomfortable encounters with people we distrust may lead to our own

salvation. Jesus shows us a new way to learn about one another, learn the truth of one another and learn that we need one another.

When we lived in Minneapolis, we lived in the parsonage beside the church – which is why we don't live beside Nutana Park now. One day the doorbell rang and looking through the window, I knew it was somebody looking for money. I hate these situations, especially on my front doorstep. It was very tempting not to answer the door. But bound by the burden of Christian and pastoral duty, I opened the door and sure enough Alfred was looking for 20 bucks to get some ID as he had just gotten out of prison. I was immediately on the defense mode. I told him the church office was closed and unfortunately, Community Emergency Services was also closed. He was persistent and said he'd clean out the church flower beds for the \$20. That was tempting so I told him I'd loan the church \$20 for his flower bed cleaning. He was so happy that he reached out his hand to shake mine. Distrusting, I gave a limp handshake.

I got the tools and garbage bags out of the garage. Then he said he needed a sandwich and so I returned home to make a sandwich and back to the church again. I was really starting to get resentful of the time and energy this encounter was taking. But Alfred was doing a good job and I thanked him for that and he smiled and said, "God bless you pastor." I wish homeless people wouldn't bless me. It makes me feel like a jerk. But I need all the blessings I can get and homeless people continue to teach me important lessons; which is why I volunteer at Friendship Inn in Saskatoon – just to keep me in touch with reality. Again, not wishing to encourage panhandling in my new city, I just ignore the guys outside Midtown Plaza and on Broadway and walk quickly past without making eye contact. But due to my appreciation of my new friends at Friendship

Inn who accept me, the haughty white Christian woman as I am, I have begun smiling and making eye contact with panhandlers. They know I'm not going to give them any money because I'm moving too fast but the other day the guy on Broadway blessed me anyhow.

Jesus initiated contact and mutuality with someone of different race, religion, gender and marital status than himself and they were both transformed as a result of it. The water they offered each other, water that quenches the thirst of body and soul, holds the gift of life for all. True worship takes place not at a sacred mountain or even a shared ancestral well, but in relationship with the person of Christ, who is the wellspring of hope and peace. Let us pray...