

Nourishing Witness

John 4:5-30

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So he 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 worshiped 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 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 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. (John 4:5-30, NRSV)

Around the world, every day,
women are walking for water.
They go to the well, to the river, to the lake,
with one hand by their side,
with one hand holding the pot above.
they walk,

slowly, carefully, gracefully,
swans stepping through tall green grass.

Around the world, every day,
women are walking for water.
They walk through sand, in mud, on streets,
with babies on their backs,
with children by their sides,
they walk,
pictures of strength and sweat and style,
bracelets, buckets, scarves, and stains.

Around the world, every day,
women are walking for water.
They wear reds and blues and browns.
They carry plastic and clay and metal.
They scoop, they fill, they lift,
they walk
from here to home, from home to here,
each day, the tides ebb and flow.

Around the world, every day,
women are walking for water.
To boil, to rinse, to drink, to soak,
to cleanse, to nourish, to save, to live,
they do what their mothers did:
they walk.
The proud, the shamed, the old, the young,
they go to the source, then they go home.

This coming and going for water has been going on for centuries of generations.
It's hard work, women's work,
at least that's who primarily has done it.
And so it was just another day in the life of one woman in Samaria
when she picked up her water jar,
and walked to the well for water.

This wasn't just any well.
It was an ancient well,
 a well that was built by Jacob,
 the patriarch of the twelve tribes of Israel.
This well nourished the first family of Israel.
This well helped them to survive in a dry and thirsty land,
 to raise cattle, to raise sons and daughters, to live.
Just as it does today, life revolves around water,
 and communities revolved around wells.
And so this nameless Samaritan woman,
 she walked for water,

just like her ancestors had done for generations,
just like women do to this day, this very day.

The well's still there, you know.
Samaritans and Muslims and Jews and Christians
disagree about many things,
but all agree on the location of Jacob's well.
And it's right where John tells us it is.

It is at a road junction,
just north of the place where the roads
from Jerusalem and the Jordan Valley
join at the foot of Mount Gerizim.

The Samaritans believe that God chose to put the temple
on Mount Gerizim rather than on Jerusalem's Temple Mount.
Mount Gerizim was and continues to be the center of Samaritan religion,
and today over ninety percent of the worldwide population of Samaritans
live in very close proximity to this mountain.

Sometimes, it boggles my mind
that we can actually drink from the well that Jesus drank from,
we can sit at the place where Jesus sat,
and we can see the mountain that Jesus saw when he sat there.
In Jesus, the eternal God becomes entangled in maps and pictures and place names.
In Jesus, the eternal God becomes present in the mundane, everyday tasks
that you do simply because they have to be done,
like, for many women across the world,
walk to a well for water.

You know, you can still visit Jacob's well,
but, unfortunately, it no longer is a place
that sustains the lives of the people who live around it.

In the fourth century, the well was claimed by Christians,
and a church was built over it.
Of course, Samaritans resented this claim
and they revolted against the church, destroying the building.
The church was rebuilt by the Roman Emperor Justinian,
but it was destroyed again.
In the name of Christ, European Crusaders in the twelfth century
fought and killed their way into Palestine
and again built a church over Jacob's well.
But that church was destroyed less than thirty years later by Saladin),
a leader of the Muslim opposition.

Today, Jacob's well belongs to the Greek Orthodox Church.
An ornate church building sits on top of it,

with beautiful gardens and paintings and mosaic floors.
A peaceful place, I'm told.

Yet right across the street from Jacob's well
is the largest Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank --
the Balata Camp, where almost 30,000 Palestinian refugees
live on a piece of land that covers less than a tenth of a square mile.
Think about that.

But if you want to visit Jacob's Well, you shouldn't worry.
It is completely enclosed, protected, and guarded.
It's a safe place for tourists on vacation looking for snapshots.
It's not a place for refugees looking for water.

And especially not someone like the Samaritan woman
in the story before us this morning.
In verse 9, John makes it clear that Jews did not associate with Samaritans.
The distance between Samaria and Jerusalem was only thirty-five miles,
but Samaritans often harassed Jewish pilgrims passing through Samaria,
and Jews considered Samaritans to be unclean,
both in their being and their religion.

But even more than that, men did not talk to women
unless they were family or propositioning them.
And so when the disciples returned from their shopping trip,
what surprised them was not that Jesus was talking to a Samaritan --
they probably expected that by now --
but that Jesus was talking to a Samaritan *woman*.

A shamed Samaritan woman, a shunned woman.
In verse 6, John includes an important detail that we can easily miss.
The time. "It was about the sixth hour," we're told.
The sixth hour is high noon by ancient timekeeping, the heat of the day.
This is not the time that women usually came for water.
In John, chapter 3, the religious leader Nicodemus
came to Jesus to ask him questions about God.
But he did so at night, in private, lest he be shamed.
He needed to protect his reputation.
This Samaritan woman came for water at noon, alone,
because she was shamed.
People knew her reputation.

The very chore that needed to be done
to sustain the life of herself and her family
was a daily reminder of her isolation, her shame.
She came alone to Jacob's well, the well that nourished Israel.¹

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Identity confirmation: John 4:5-42," *The Christian Century* (February 12, 2008),
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2008-02/identity-confirmation>.

But we need to be careful before we make any more assumptions
about her and why she was shamed.

If you read this story closely, you'll see only that Jesus knows
that this woman has been married five times
and that she now is with a man who is not her husband,
suggesting that her partner is someone else's husband.

Some biblical commentators have taken that one piece of information about her
to suggest that this woman was immoral,

that she was sexually promiscuous, maybe a prostitute

It's obvious that something isn't right, but we simply don't know more.

Have there been untimely deaths? Thoughtless divorces? Abuse? Infidelity?

But even so, whatever the case is,

we are blind if we see her story as anything but tragic.

The desire to label this woman and others like her

makes us allies with those who isolated them in the first place.

When we do that, it's like covering a well with walls and a roof to restrict
who can enter and who must stay away,

who can live and who must go thirsty.

The only thing that qualified this broken Samaritan woman

to meet and speak with Jesus

was that she was getting water and Jesus needed a drink.

Rich or poor, proud or shamed, sinner or saint, when it comes to water,
all of us get thirsty.

And who are we to say who can or cannot drink?

Of course, the Samaritan woman was surprised that Jesus was talking with her.

But Jesus answered her in one of the greatest, most grace-filled

and hopeful verses in the entire Bible,

"If you only knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink,

you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

In John's gospel, living water refers to the gift of the Holy Spirit,

and the Holy Spirit is not a prize or a reward. It is a gift.

What God makes free, let no one make costly.

You know, a lot of people live their lives ignoring their trauma

because it does not rise to the level of the traumatic experiences of others.

But one thing that I have learned is that trauma is trauma,

what one might experience as insignificant

another might define their life around it,

rehashing it, thinking about the same old hurts over and over,

If we're not careful, those of us who appear successful in the eyes of many,

project our own trauma responses upon those who have suffered most,

labeling and then looking down on them,

calling them to personal responsibility
while ignoring our own desperate thirst for grace.

To drink the water of which Jesus speaks,
is to be the despised wife of five husbands,
is to be the father or mother who
 feel helpless to save their children,
is to be the man or woman who is scarred
 by wounds inflicted on them as a boy or a girl,
is to be fifty years old and feeling like you've made no difference,
is to punish yourself over and over for mistakes you can't rectify
is to be defined by a tragic story whatever it is,
 and then to be seen fully, to be known intimately
 and to be given dignity.
so you begin living a life being healed and not being shamed.

The woman walked for water, alone, carrying her water jar,
 Just like she always did.
But one day, she met Jesus,
 just sitting there, telling her all the things that she had ever done,
 but treating her for whom she was made to be,
 not who she and others said she was.

Do not call this woman the woman at the well,
 though that is what she was.
Do not call this woman a sinner,
 though that is what she was.
No, call her simply someone who has been with Jesus.
Call her a witness, a disciple, an evangelist,
For she had come alone, ashamed,
 but now she ran to the center of town.
This is a story of a woman who came for water but who went home with the well.
"Come and see the man who told me everything I ever did," she said.
"Could this be the Messiah?" she simply asked.

Today we celebrate our fellowship with Anabaptists around the world
 and in our own conference.
Yet God is not bound by place or tradition or doctrine,
We worship in many languages, we have many traditions, and rituals,
 and we all gather at the well of living water
Like the Samaritan woman, let us be thirsty for the work of the Spirit;
 let us cross barriers for the undivided love of God.

Around the world, every day,
 women are walking for water.
To boil, to rinse, to drink, to soak,
to cleanse, to nourish, to save, to live,
they do what their mothers did:

they walk.
The proud, the shamed, the old, the young,
they go to the source, then they . . .
run to the center of town,
as witnesses to the man with living water;
for after meeting Jesus,
those who come for water go home with the well.

Amen.