

Jesus Met The Woman At The Well

a sermon by Pastor D. Thomas Ford, Jr.
Salem Lutheran Church
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John 4:

[5] So he came to a city of Samar'ia, called Sy'char, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph.

[6] Jacob's well was there, and so Jesus, wearied as he was with his journey, sat down beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

[7] There came a woman of Samar'ia to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."

[8] For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.

[9] The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samar'ia?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

[10] 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."

[11] The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water?"

[12] Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, and his sons, and his cattle?"

[13] Jesus said to her, "Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again,

[14] but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

[15] The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."

[16] Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here."

[17] The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband';

[18] for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly."

[19] The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.

[20] Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."

[21] Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.

[22] You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

[23] But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him.

[24] God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

- [25] The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things."
- [26] Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."
- [27] Just then his disciples came. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but none said, "What do you wish?" or, "Why are you talking with her?"
- [28] So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people,
- [29] "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?"
- [30] They went out of the city and were coming to him.
- [31] Meanwhile the disciples besought him, saying, "Rabbi, eat."
- [32] But he said to them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know."
- [33] So the disciples said to one another, "Has any one brought him food?"
- [34] Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work.
- [35] Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest.
- [36] He who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.
- [37] For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.'
- [38] I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor; others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."
- [39] Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did."
- [40] So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.
- [41] And many more believed because of his word.
- [42] They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."



When Dwight David Eisenhower was President of The United States in the 1950's, he succeeded in getting legislation through Congress to provide loans to people to help them install running water and bathrooms inside their houses. He was appalled at the numbers of people in the South who were still getting their water by drawing it from a well and who still were using outhouses.

In 1958 my Grandmother Ford decided to take advantage of the favorable loan rates being offered and have running water installed in our home and an indoor bathroom. I was 11 years old.

I was enlisted in the work in a way I will never forget. Grandma asked me to help her carry rocks from the fields on our farm to throw into the shallow well we had, so we could fill it

and then cap it. It would no longer be needed, as we were getting a new and much deeper well dug. So, with my little red wagon we started hauling loads of rocks and filling up the old well. It was only about 35 feet deep and maybe 2 feet in diameter. It was a lot of work for a 62 year old woman and an 11 year old boy. I can still see the rocks, like this one, hurtle down into the water of what was the first open well I ever saw. But eventually we got the job done and the old well was history. And a new deep well was dug and plumbed and, voila!, we had running water in our house – a mere 128 years after The White House got it during the Jackson Administration.

I liked the indoor running water – hot and cold – and the indoor bathroom facilities – but I missed the old open well. My nostalgia was satisfied when occasionally we would go to visit my Great Uncle Will Clark on his farm and he would let me go with him to walk his two mules to his covered well. He would let me laboriously draw up buckets of water and pour it into Number 3 tin tubs for the mules to drink their fill. Let me tell you, when you are drawing a well bucket filled with 5 gallons of water weighing 8 lbs. per gallon up from 85 feet with a rope winding itself around the crank, it is work! It's not something you want to be doing in the hot sun, if you can help it. Nor is it something you want to be doing if you are tired.

Yet, the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well was coming at high noon in the blazing sun to draw water. Jesus was tired and thirsty. Follow the words of your bulletin insert as I play for you how Peter, Paul and Mary sing about the story.

play “Jesus Met The Woman At The Well” by Peter, Paul & Mary

Jesus met the woman at the well
 Jesus met the woman at the well
 Jesus met the woman at the well
 And he told her everything she'd ever done

He said, "woman, woman, where is your husband?"
 He said, "woman, woman, where is your husband?"
 He said, "woman, woman, where is your husband?"
 "i know everything you've ever done"

She said, "jesus, jesus, i ain't got no husband"
 She said, "jesus, jesus, i ain't got no husband"
 She said, "jesus, jesus, ain't got no husband"
 "and you don't know everything i've ever done"

He said, "woman, woman, you've got five husbands" He said, "woman, woman, you've got five husbands"

He said, "woman, woman, you've got five husbands"
 "and the one you have now, he's not your own"

She said, "this man, this man, he must be a prophet"
 She said, "this man, this man, he must be a prophet"
 She said, "this man, this man, he must be a prophet"
 "he done told me everything i've ever done"

Jesus met the woman at the well
 Jesus met the woman at the well
 Jesus met the woman at the well
 And he told her everything she'd ever done

In 1983 I watched an Orthodox monk draw a bucket of water from Jacob's Well, the very one in today's Gospel. The well bottom has varied in depth through the centuries, from 240 feet in A.D. 670 to 67 feet in A.D. 1881. It was "very deep" in Jesus' day (John 4:11). Our group gathered around and drank from a common brass cup. This well, from which Jesus once asked a drink, is fed by underground springs, and its water is fresh and cool. Because the water is moving and not from a cistern, the ancients called it "living water" -- a term to which Jesus gave a new and special meaning.¹

Living Water. You came here [this morning], like I did, I assume, for some Living Water. Yes? You know this is where Jesus has been known to show up. The Salem Well. You've been here before. You know Jesus also knows everything you have ever done. Absolutely everything. And that still he unconditionally loves and accepts you and does not condemn you, as well he could. And that he offers you for the drinking Living Water.

The One who offers you this Living Water is the same one who left the woman at the well and went up there to hang on the Cross and to plead for all to hear, "I thirst". He is the same One whose riven side gushed water and blood. This is the One who is here now through the Holy Spirit in the Living Water of our shared-and-lived-out baptisms and shared-and-lived-out Word and Sacrament of Holy Communion to quench true thirst, ours and the world's.

"Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst ..."

Today's Gospel is only understood and celebrated appropriately, though, as we recall the great separation and animosity which existed between Jews and Samaritans. They absolutely had nothing to do with each other. Jesus rejected this kind of separation completely and reached out to accept this woman and to offer her a drink of Living Water.

¹ <http://www.edwardfudge.com/sychar.html>

For us to fully appreciate the radicality of what Jesus did, imagine his going today to Hollywood and having dinner with Elizabeth Taylor and Michael Jackson and Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky and Mickey Rooney and Brittany Spears and Cher and Madonna and Rush Limbaugh and Newt Gingrich and Ann Coulter. If they aren't repulsive-enough, pick out and name your favorite top-of-the-heap sinner!

Someone puts it this way, "[Today's] ... gospel witnesses to the gift of God for all God's children. In the vulnerability of an interdependent community, in the insistence upon relationship, in the breaking down of barriers. Jesus shows us a new way to learn about one another, learn the truth of one another, and learn that we need one another. True worship takes place not at a sacred mountain or even a shared ancestral well, but in a relationship with the person of Christ, who is the wellspring and mountaintop of hope and peace."²

Yes, Jesus reaches out to and accepts the outcast woman, but he also tells her what he knows about her. And she is willing to listen.

Barbara Brown Taylor has written, "By telling the woman who she is, Jesus shows her who he is. By confirming her true identity, he reveals his own, and that is how it still happens. The Messiah is the one in whose presence you know who you really are--the good and bad of it, the all of it, the hope in it. The Messiah is the one who shows you who you are by showing you who he is--who crosses all boundaries, breaks all rules, drops all disguises--speaking to you like someone you have known all your life, bubbling up in your life like a well that needs no dipper, so that you go back to face people you thought you could never face again, speaking to them as boldly as he spoke to you. 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done.'"³

I wish more people would come to the "well" – that is, encounter Jesus The Christ as Living Water. Many people in our culture are living their lives with no substance, no purpose, simply gratifying the senses and going through diversionary motions. And many more are merely nominal members of the church and believe it is perfectly o.k. to show up only when you feel like it, but for sure when it's time for a baptism, a wedding or a funeral or Christmas or Easter. And still others go to church more often, but distort the Gospel to be "God helps those who help themselves" and "give because that is the way to be blessed materially by God." For vast millions, though, there is absolutely no desire whatsoever for any involvement with Christianity in any way, shape or form, in or outside the church. Any religion which exists is self-manufactured, feel-good stuff.

² Patricia Farris, "Unlikely Messenger," *The Christian Century*, February 13-20, 2002, p. 16.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Living By The Word," *The Christian Century*, February 28, 1996. http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_n7_v113/ai_18055618

Richard Lischer, who teaches at Duke, says, “Like our Samaritan sister, we too have struggled to believe and have made some tragicomic missteps in the process. Like her, we are comfortable with the words of religion, but we sometimes fail to connect them to the living Lord. We speak easily of salvation but quantify it, if not in buckets of water, then with blessings you can carry to the bank. We have elevated listening to the self to an art form of Proustian proportions, but we do not listen to the one who can tell us everything we ever did. We make the family a substitute for salvation, as if we had never heard of God's family, the church. Most of all, we love life itself and expect our technology to make it extremely fulfilling”⁴

Sometimes when I look at this mess we have created in our world, I think to myself: I wish I had the answer. A way to make it better. A solution. Religion isn't doing it. If anything, religion is making it worse. Humans, with whatever assistance they employ, be it New Ageism or humanism or Dr. Phil, are not making it better.

Then I remember: I, we do have the answer!

The Amazon River is the largest river in the world. The mouth is 90 miles across. There is enough water to exceed the combined flow of the Yangtze, Mississippi and Nile Rivers. So much water comes from the Amazon that they can detect its currents 200 miles out in the Atlantic Ocean. One irony of ancient navigation is that sailors in ancient times died for lack of water... caught in windless waters of the South Atlantic. They were adrift, helpless, dying of thirst. Sometimes other ships from South America who knew the area would come alongside and call out, "What is your problem?" And they would exclaim, "Can you spare us some water? Our sailors are dying of thirst!" And from the other ship would come the cry, "Just lower your buckets. You are in the mouth of the mighty Amazon River." The tragedy around us today is that God, the fountain of living water, is right here and people don't know to seek to draw from Him.⁵

When you go to a well for water, you have to lower the bucket or you won't get any water. But what if you don't know where the well is? And what if you don't even know your true thirst?

Jesus Our Lord went to the well to seek out the Samaritan woman. She was not seeking Him. This tells us God is seeking us out. He knows we don't know what our true thirst is, nor where his well is nor that there is any bucket to lower.

⁴ Richard Lischer, “Strangers In The Night,” The Christian Century, February 24, 1999.

⁵ <http://elbourne.org/sermons/index.mv?illustration+4409>

The Cross is God's way of seeking us out. It is Eternal Love. It is the well of Living Water. Lent is the time we come again to "see the streams of living waters springing from eternal love." To pray: "well supply thy sons and daughters." Indeed, to declare "who can faint while such a river ever flows" our "thirst to assuage". "Grace, which like the Lord, the giver, never fails from age to age."

Like the Samaritan woman, we are found by The Living Water, Jesus Our Lord and we drink our fill, never to thirst again, and we go out to tell everyone. That is how they find out there is Living Water. Make it a point to go out and tell someone this week. Amen.