

“Living Water”

*“The water that I will give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14).*

Have you ever felt like an outsider? Like you didn't belong in the group? Perhaps you were a newcomer to the community. Maybe it was something you said or did that ruined your reputation. Or maybe the innate reality of disability, race, or gender created an unspoken barrier that marked you as an outsider. Whatever the reason, the sting of alienation and the shame that follows create a pain you never forget. And that is exactly what we see in the woman from today's Gospel reading.

The woman who approached Jesus at Jacob's well was an outcast, and one of the reasons for this reality was something she couldn't have helped if she wanted to. You see, this woman was a Samaritan, and, by virtue of her very existence, she was considered unclean by her Jewish neighbors. This long-standing hatred of Samaritans had existed for more than seven centuries. It started when the Assyrians conquered Israel and deported all the Israelites who had special skills or value, then settled the land of Samaria with foreigners. These imported pagans married the surviving Israelites, and what resulted was a culture that mixed Jewish worship practices with the idolatry of the Assyrians. When the Jews finally returned from their captivity, these “Samaritans” attempted to join them, but, with their mixed race and hybrid religion, they were utterly rejected by the Jewish establishment. Around 400 B.C., the Samaritans finally built their own temple on Mount Gerizim, and the rift between the Jews and the Samaritans was fixed forever.

Not only was the woman at the well a Samaritan, but she was also a public sinner. And, even before Jesus revealed the facts of her adulterous life, the details of this reading tell us that this woman was a pariah even in her own village. John is careful to mention the hour of the day at which this meeting took place because this information tells us something about the woman's relationship to her community. You see, unless there was some kind of emergency, people didn't draw water at high noon. It was simply too hot, and it was right in the middle of their workday. People typically drew water in the morning or in the evening, but this woman was there at “the sixth hour” because coming to the well at a normal time meant that she would have to endure judging stares and harsh words from her fellow villagers, and she would be forced to deal with the fact that she was an outsider even among her own people.

Perhaps you've experienced similar pain, and maybe you've even felt it in the church. I've talked with many people who have been abandoned by the church as they've dealt with a sin or crisis that played itself out in a public way. Shamefully and sinfully, we are all guilty of this type of betrayal. We have all walked away from people in their time of need. We have all stood silently by as some poor soul struggled alone, and we have all abandoned people in their sin. But that's not what Jesus did.

Today's text begins with verse five, but one of the most important parts of this story is actually found in verse four. Here, John writes, “And (Jesus) *had to pass* through Samaria.” We learn, in the beginning of chapter four, that to avoid unwanted attention from the Pharisees, Jesus and the disciples were heading back to Galilee, and it's here that John writes, “And he *had to pass* through Samaria.” On the surface, this seems like nothing more than a description of the route Jesus and the disciples would take as they moved north, but there's more to these words than mere logistics. You see, “good Jews” did everything they could to avoid going through Samaria. This was not the normal route from Judea to Galilee, and it was certainly not a path they “had” to take. These words are a proclamation of Jesus' mission, and they tell us that the path Jesus took through Samaria was a purposeful part of His plan.

This fact is further supported by John's note in verse eight that, "his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food" (John 4:8). It doesn't take twelve people to get groceries and, in a town that would've been hostile to Jewish pilgrims, the disciples wouldn't have left their rabbi by Himself...that is, not unless Jesus told them to. Imagine for a moment if they had stayed with Jesus. The presence of 13 Jewish men gathered around Jacob's Well would have been more than intimidating to the woman Jesus came to find, and, even if she'd have been bold enough to cut through this crowd of Jewish men, the disciples would've never allowed such a questionable conversation. But instead, Jesus made sure that He was alone and, with just one man alone at the well, the woman approached to draw her water, and what happened next changed her life forever.

First, Jesus ignored a social taboo of the day by speaking to a woman. Then, He disregarded the religious tradition and prejudice of His culture by asking for a drink from the jar of an unclean Samaritan. In this gesture, Jesus entered into fellowship with this woman and went where no one else would go. He knowingly, intentionally, and shockingly chose to create a relationship with an unworthy, unclean, outcast of a woman, and He did it to bring her living water. And that is exactly what He's done for us as well.

In today's reading from Romans, Paul describes the love that God has for us in equally shocking language when he writes, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8).

In this story at the well, we see how God works. We see a Savior who enters into our sinful world, who is not afraid to confront the darkness of our lives, who is not scared off by our past, and who persistently points us to the gift of God that gives us life forever! Today, in this ancient story, we see Christ, and today we are given the sure and certain promise that He has come for sinners...just like us!

Jesus *had to go* through Samaria because, spiritually speaking, the people of Samaria were dying of thirst. And this is a powerful lesson for us as well. As people for whom Christ died – as people who have been quenched with the living water of Baptism and heard the forgiving Gospel of Jesus and received the promise of eternal life – we also *have to go* because, with God, there is no segregation. The living water of Jesus is for everyone, and every day we are surrounded by people who are dying of thirst. The person at work everyone's afraid to approach needs living water. The widow on your street who has no family needs living water. The kid in your school who has no friends and is picked on every day needs living water. The person in church who always sits alone and who comes and goes unnoticed needs living water! And when you extend to them in the forgiving name of Jesus, you are giving them the water that wells up to eternal life.

It may not always be comfortable, and you may not always be welcomed, but in Christ we have been called and freed to take living water to thirsty people who need to know that there is a God who sees everything they have ever done, who loves them no matter what, and who has given everything so they will never be thirsty again. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

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