

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d’Alene
Third Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 12, 2020
10am

Text: John 4:5-42 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

Last Tuesday, March 8, was International Women’s Day and March is Women’s History Month. The observance of a Women’s Day in the United States dates back to 1909 and Women’s History Month was established in 1987. Both observances recognize the achievements and contributions of women where women’s stories have frequently been downplayed and ignored.

These secular observances happen to coincide with our lectionary gospel reading: Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well. This story appears in the lectionary cycle just once every three years, which means that if we follow the lectionary, we will not hear this story read again until 2026.

I last preached on this story three years ago – March 15, 2020 – the first Sunday the pandemic closed our church sanctuaries. Soap and water were our only defense against the virus. I shared some WASH – water, sanitation, and hygiene – statistics in my sermon, and this week I went back and looked up those statistics again to see if they have changed.

In March 2020, the CDC reported that 780 million people worldwide did not have access to safe drinking water at home. Three years later that number has risen to two billion people. It appears we have lost some ground. Clean water is critical for fighting disease. But water is also a flashpoint for human rights, particularly women’s rights. The drawing and carrying of water is traditionally ‘women’s work.’ The CDC reports that “Women and girls are more likely to be responsible for collecting water for their family...These responsibilities make it difficult for girls to attend school during school hours.”¹ When we bring clean running water

¹ https://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/global/wash_statistics.html

to people's homes, we do more than improve their health; we also empower women's access to education – a crucial steppingstone to women's equality.

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is powerful precisely because Jesus speaks to this woman as his equal and takes the time to teach her. A first-century Jewish man would not normally initiate a private conversation with a woman who was not his wife. But this story is the longest recorded dialogue that Jesus has with anyone, even his male disciples.

In the Bible, wells are important places of meeting, especially for women. People visit, trade gossip, tell stories, and build community. But the Samaritan woman has come to the well alone. She cuts a lonely figure, drawing water only after the other women have come and gone.

Loneliness is yet another spiritual wilderness we wander. Solitude is when we choose to be alone, but loneliness is rarely a choice. As our poetry prayer demonstrated, the stories we tell about ourselves and the stories we tell about each other can conspire to wall us off, keep us isolated from the lifeblood of community. Our protagonist is a woman and a Samaritan. She has also been married five times and is now 'living in sin.' Each piece of her story comes with its own pain and shame and moral judgments. Each piece of her story conspires to keep her alone, separate, isolated.

Bad interpretations of this story allege this woman was an immoral woman. This ignores the fact that women of her time normally did not get to choose who they married. They also could not initiate a divorce. She may have been widowed or divorced or a combination thereof. The point is that she probably had very little choice in her marital circumstances, and still her community ostracized her.

But Jesus is uninterested in her marital history. He perceives the truth of her life, but he does not use it as a weapon against her. Instead, he uses it to reveal who *he* is, so that when the woman walks away, she finds herself wondering, "Could this man be the Messiah?"

Jesus has not come to this well by accident. This well is in Samaria, between Judea in the south and Galilee in the north. The scripture reminds us that "Jews and Samaritans do not share things in common." This is not entirely true; Jews and

Samaritans shared a common heritage, but they did not get along. Their contempt for each other was rooted in an ancient dispute over the proper place for worship. The Jews believed that God's home was on the temple mount in Jerusalem, but the Samaritans disagreed and built a temple on Mount Gerizim in Samaria. This angered the Jews. Eventually they destroyed the Samaritan temple.

Jesus is aware of the ancient feud; even so, he decides to travel through the wilderness of Samaria rather than go around it. He arrives at the well, tired and thirsty, and asks the woman for a cup of water. Her response is not gracious. "You're a Jew and I'm a Samaritan. Are you sure you want to ask me for a drink?" To which Jesus replies: "If you knew who you're speaking to, you would ask *me* for a drink. And I would give you something better. I would give you living water."

Living water can describe running water, like a stream or river, rather than water from a well. Like Nicodemus before her, the Samaritan woman hears Jesus' words literally. She thinks Jesus is offering her a water source where she won't have to do the hard labor of hauling it up from the bottom of a well.

But Jesus is not offering literal water; he's offering spiritual water. "Everyone who drinks the water from this well will eventually be thirsty again," Jesus tells the woman, "but those who drink the water that I give them will never thirst again. A spring of water will break open in their souls, gushing up to eternal life" (vv. 13-14).

Eternal life, eternal sustenance. Last week we learned that eternal life is a present reality – a way of living governed by the movement of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is promising a well that will never run dry, a fountain in our very souls. This spring of water is the gift of God's Spirit – God's lifegiving presence permanently in our midst. In Exodus, the people wandering in the wilderness cry out for water, and when God gives it to them, they can hardly believe it. "Is the LORD really with us?" they ask (Exod 17:7) But we know the answer to that question. God's home is not a temple on a mountain. Instead, through Jesus, God has made God's home with God's people. God's home is in each of us and the connections between us. God makes God's home wherever we seek lifegiving relationship with God and each other. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt 18:20).

What Jesus offers the Samaritan woman is a new intimacy with God: God's Spirit dwelling with our spirits. And this intimacy is transformative. It transcends differences in creed and tradition. It breaks down barriers of separation and hostility. It locates us in the wilderness of our individual stories – stories of shame, judgment, pain, loneliness – and transforms isolation into connection.

True connection with another person requires intimacy, and intimacy can feel dangerous because it leaves us open and exposed. We struggle to connect with each other because we are afraid of the trust and vulnerability that lifegiving relationship requires. We keep our guards up and our interactions shallow.

Initially the Samaritan woman is like this with Jesus. She's prickly, skeptical, stand-offish. And honestly, she has good reason not to trust him. Jesus understands the fear behind her defensiveness, and so *he* takes the first step in building trust: He offers the woman a part of *his* story. He tells her he is the Messiah. She is the first person to whom Jesus reveals his identity in John's Gospel. Jesus chooses to entrust this tremendous revelation not to his male disciples but to a Samaritan woman with five husbands living in sin. He builds a bridge of connection with her that transforms this woman's life and the life of her community. She becomes the first evangelist, and the Samaritans – religious outcasts and ancient enemies of the Jews – become the vanguard of God's kingdom.

God always takes the first step of intimacy. God made Himself vulnerable in Jesus by becoming human, bearing our sin and shame and suffering, in order to break down the divine-human barrier and connect with us in a new and lifegiving way. The painful and shame-filled stories we carry do not need to trap us in a wilderness of isolation. Jesus has made a way through that wilderness and offers us the living water of relationship with God and with each other. When we choose, like Jesus, to venture into the wildernesses that isolate us from each other – wildernesses of pain, grief, and shame; wildernesses of social, religious, and political difference; wildernesses of fear and othering – when we choose to bravely venture into these wildernesses and build trust with each other, we will receive God's gift of healed and reconciled relationship.

Jesus offers us living water, the gift of God's Spirit bubbling up inside of us, overflowing in compassion for every person we encounter. We worship God in Spirit and in truth when we venture into the wildernesses of separation and

create instead oases of connection, drawing people into the loving embrace of our Father in heaven. Jesus tells his disciples that the fields are ripe for harvest. People in our community are starving for connection, to be seen and known and loved. This is our mission field, church! Who are we not connecting with because we assume they are not worth building a relationship with? May we receive from each other the cups of living water that our hearts desire, and may we offer that living water to our neighbors, too.

Amen.