

**March 12, 2023**

**Third Sunday of Lent**

**Will you give me a drink?**

**John 4:1-6 (7-42)**

*Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John"<sup>2</sup> (although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized),<sup>3</sup> he left Judea and started back to Galilee.<sup>4</sup> But he had to go through Samaria.<sup>5</sup> So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.<sup>6</sup> Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.*

Please pray with me: God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking.

Our scripture reading for today is just the introduction. The story, found in John 4, continues for another 35 verses. I encourage you to read it. Given that it is a long story, I thought it might be easier on the ears for me to tell the story and add a little commentary along the way.

Jesus is on his way to Galilee, traveling from Judea. These two regions are separated by the region known as Samaria, and as you might suspect, people called Samaritans live there. At one point in Israel's history it was all one nation, but a succession of kings and conquests left it divided up. Samaritans shared Jewish ancestry, but because of marriages to foreigners during these long seasons of conquest, it was a mixed race of people and religious practices, rejected by Jewish people of Galilee and Judea. Generally, Jewish people did not associate with Samaritans, and in many cases, Samaritans were mistrusted and despised.

There is a curious detail in the introduction to our story. Jesus had to go through Samaria. Technically, he didn't. Though out of the way, there was another route for Jewish people choosing to avoid Samaria. But it says, Jesus **had** to go through Samaria. Either he was in a hurry, or he had another reason. Tired by the journey, Jesus stops to rest at an iconic resting place, Jacob's well. Jacob was an ancestor that Samaritans and Jews had in common.

It is about noon. We presume it is hot, and Jesus is thirsty. Along comes a Samaritan woman, bucket in hand, to draw water for her chores. Jesus asks her for a drink. She is taken aback by his request. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

*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."<sup>11</sup> The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?<sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"<sup>13</sup> Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup> 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.”*

Like Nicodemus, in the story that precedes this one, she is confused. When Jesus talked to Nicodemus about being reborn, Nicodemus wrestled with how that might be possible – as he imagined crawling back into his mother’s womb. The Samaritan woman struggles to understand this living water Jesus is talking about. She imagines a source of water that end the daily burden of hauling water. They both struggle, like we might, with Jesus’ use of metaphorical language. What is he talking about?

Unlike Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus in the dark of night. The Samaritan woman encounters Jesus at the brightest part of the day. This contrasting detail makes me think these stories are companion stories. Nicodemus is guarded and full of what he knows, perhaps even fearful of being seen with Jesus. The Samaritan woman is vulnerable and open, and as we later will learn, unafraid of telling everyone she knows about her encounter with Jesus.

It is not uncommon for people to speculate other reasons for her being at the well at noon, by herself, suggesting she is shunned and ostracized by her community, and not welcomed by the covey of women who go to the well at a more reasonable time of day. The reason they draw this conclusion is because of the dialogue that follows.

*<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.”<sup>17</sup> The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband,’<sup>18</sup> for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!”<sup>19</sup> The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.”*

Five husbands? That little detail stirs our imaginations. Our modern ears immediately start to think that this woman is scandalous, the equivalent of the town whore. She must be a wretched sinner in need of salvation. Now she is living with some guy. No wonder the other women don’t want her around. That must be why she is at the well at noon when no one else is around. I’ve heard her called all kinds of things, none of it good. But what do we really know?

We know that she has had five husbands and the man she is living with now is not her husband. It’s not like women had a great deal of agency in those days. Women had to get a male advocate to initiate a divorce, making it an ordeal. Life expectancy was about 30 for peasants, husbands die. Dowry and the cost of weddings made it out of reach for some, so they lived together. So what? It doesn’t mean anything. It is simply her situation, and Jesus knows it. And because he knows this, she discerns that Jesus must be a prophet. That’s it. That’s all. Notice that Jesus doesn’t make it an issue.

Discerning that he must be a prophet, she goes on to ask Jesus an astute question.

*20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” 21 Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 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 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. 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” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” 26 Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”*

As he was speaking to her, Jesus’ disciples return from a shopping trip in town and they see him talking to this Samaritan woman. They were astonished to see Jesus talking to her but said nothing about it to Jesus. She leaves, and heads into town, leaving her water jar behind, telling everyone she saw about her encounter with Jesus. “Come and see!” was the gist of her message, “He told me everything I have ever done!” she said. And many Samaritans came to believe because of her witness. And Jesus and his disciples stayed there two days, eating, and associating with Samaritans. Clearly, he wasn’t in a hurry to get to Galilee.

This is not the story of a scandalous woman, or a forgiven sinner. Why would so many in her community respond to her impassioned invitation to “come and see” if she was despised and rejected by her community? There is a long history of Biblical women being interpreted as sexually scandalous, rather than recognizing their faithful witness. This woman does what Nicodemus cannot, she brings her whole town together to welcome Jesus as their guest.

This story says as much about Jesus as it does the woman. He had to go to Samaria, and once there, we see him dismantling bitter and long-standing walls of division, with conversation and table fellowship. He doesn’t show up, guns a blazing, about the right way to do things, the right place to worship, and the right way to believe. He shows up asking for a drink. He shows up willing to meet people where they are. “It’s not about your mountain, or our mountain,” he says, “it’s about people thirsty and hungry for God’s wisdom, and God’s life-giving spirit.” It is about tapping into that stream of living water that helps us to see beyond our own needs and fears and prejudices, to something bigger...the kingdom of God...where walls of hatred and division are erased.

Jesus had to go through Samaria, because that is what he does, crossing borders and boundaries to take love and life to those who are demonized, marginalized, and brutalized by injustice. He doesn’t go just to give, but also to receive.

Jesus tells his disciples, “We have to go through Samaria.”

Sure, there is another route, where you don’t have to worry about being uncomfortable, or encountering people that challenge you to grow your heart and expand your mind. But Jesus had to go through Samaria.

Where is our Samaria? What borders and boundaries are Jesus calling us to cross for the sake of healing divides, and expanding the table. We have a beautiful opportunity next week to share a meal with our Afghan brothers and sisters and listen to their stories of resettlement in the United States. They want to share with us.

Where is our Samaria? Next week, during worship and our Adult Class before worship, we are going to hear from Dr. Art Blaser and Dr. Lisa Boskovich, as they lead us in a conversation about disability justice. It is an opportunity for us to learn to recognize barriers, as well as our own discomfort and assumptions about persons with disabilities.

Where is our Samaria? Where is God calling us to love out loud? Where must we go, to both give and receive, to grow and to change, to welcome and be welcomed? Where are people thirsty for a sane and compelling message of acceptance, love, compassion, and nonviolence?

“Oh, the places you’ll go!” says, Dr. Suess. How true that is for those who seek to follow Jesus. Just think of the places and spaces we have ventured with Jesus; places and spaces that have challenged us to grow our hearts and expand our minds. Learning about the experiences of those who identify as transgender. Defending drag queens from a false narrative that they are trying to sexualize children. Taking a deep dive into the racist threads woven into the fabric of our country. Attending a Pride Festival. Learning about other religions. Exploring the threat of Christian Nationalism.

Some of those places are not places at all but people whose lived experience is different from our own, people of other religions, races, cultures...people who are differently abled, people who don’t fit into our boxes of preconceived ideas and assumptions...people with whom we disagree...people who introduce us to communities and places we might have otherwise gone out of our way to avoid.

Oh, the places we go...and will go...and have yet to go...because we are willing to follow Jesus to those uncomfortable places where we are called to dismantle the walls that divide us and strengthen the ties that bind us.

Jesus had to go through Samaria. And so shall we.

Amen.