

Lent III-February 24, 2008

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Jesus and the Samaritan Woman-John 4:5-42

The townswomen had already come and gone, some six hours before. They had awakened, dressed, and gone straight to their water jars. The trip to Jacob's well was a daily rite—of necessity to be sure, but community, too. This was “girl time:” time to catch up on yesterday's events; to inquire on Martha's new child or Rachel's sick husband; to share woes, to laugh, and probably to gossip a bit, too. Fetching water every day, for drinking and washing, was women's work, and it came with its share of drudgery. (Ever fill one of those multi-gallon bottles of water in the grocery store, hoist it into your cart, into your car, and into your kitchen?) But I imagine it was more bearable because the women were in it together.

There was one woman, though, who was not “in it together.” She walked alone...at Noon...in the heat of the day, having left a home that was not her own, for she was living with someone who was not her husband. She had had *five* husbands. And who knows how many children. Why so many marriages? Perhaps she was unable to bear children, and so man after man divorced her. She, as a woman, didn't have much of a say in the matter. It's

not like she had the legal power to initiate either marriage or divorce!

Perhaps husband after husband had died through the years, and there was no one left or willing to marry her. Perhaps she now lived with a male relative; perhaps she was indeed living in “questionable circumstances.” *We are not told.* When I think of this Samaritan woman, I think of a woman living in a hostile world, with little hospitality to lighten the load. She walked alone, apart from the community of women who worked together. And yet...*despite* the injustice she suffered...*despite* her powerlessness to improve her worldly situation...she opened herself up to an encounter that changed her life and others. Jesus encountered her in a hostile world and offered a new way of living together.

The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is all about crossing boundaries and breaking down the dividing wall of hostility. With four simple words, “Give me a drink,” Jesus crossed the chasm of fear and prejudice between religious and ethnic groups. He crossed the divide between male and female. He defied traditions that favored exclusion for those whose family lives are irregular. He scoffed at traditions that made it clear that women and men outside of their families were not to converse,

period. Jesus crossed boundary after boundary to get to that Samaritan woman.

Now, she probably should have given this unknown Jewish man who brazenly spoke to her a quick sip of water, taken her water jar, and run. Who knows what his intentions were? But perhaps Jesus' request was so outrageous that it just shocked her into saying this: "How is that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" We all know Jews and Samaritans didn't get along. Here at Jacob's well it was impossible to ignore, for there they stood, in the shadow of the mountain named Gerizim, the mountain on which the woman tells Jesus the Samaritans worshipped. This was also the mountain on which Jews burned a Samaritan Temple 160 years before. There was a history *violent* hostility here, and the Samaritans had done their share of harm: they had allied with Syria in wars against the Jews and had tried to prevent the restoration of Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile.¹ There was bad blood, and people knew it and lived it. But here at Jacob's well the shared history of faith was also impossible to ignore. The woman made this clear when she talked about *her* ancestor Jacob. The Samaritans worshipped Yahweh, too, and their holy scripture was the Pentateuch, the

¹ Gundry-Volf, Judith, "Spirit, Mercy, and the Other," *Theology Today* 51, no. 4 Ja 1995, p. 509

first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy. Jacob was *their* ancestor, too, and *they* were awaiting a Messiah. Yet, as John tells us in those eye-catching parentheses in verse 9: “Jews and Samaritans didn’t share things in common.” And especially not drinking vessels. Ritual purity was serious stuff.

And the attitude of Jews toward Samaritan women was anything but hospitable. John emphasizes this attitude when he tells us that the disciples were “astonished” that Jesus was speaking to a woman. (And they wanted to berate him for it, but perhaps knew better.) The attitude embedded in a text about the ritual impurity of Samaritan women from the Jewish Mishnah was probably operative in Jesus’ day as well. This is what it says: “The daughters of the Samaritans are [deemed unclean as] menstruants from their cradle.”² Anyone who reads Leviticus knows that women who were menstruating were deemed unclean, were required to be set apart, and had to go through ritual purification every single month. This teaching in the Mishnah deemed Samaritan women perpetually, permanently unclean, and while there is no proving that this was an operative law in Jesus’ day, the attitudes behind such regulations were certainly at work. No wonder the

² Gundry-Volf, Judith, “Spirit, Mercy, and the Other,” *Theology Today* 51, no. 4 Ja 1995, p. 508, see footnote 2. Mishna Nidda 4.1

Samaritan woman was so shocked by those four simple words: “Give Me a Drink” and why Jesus’ disciples simply couldn’t hide their disgust for Jesus’ engagement with the woman at the well. And Jesus didn’t care. He defied and scoffed at anything that stood in the way of new relationships and full inclusion.

In a hostile world, Jesus initiates a new kind of hospitality. In Jesus, through Jesus, with Jesus, all things will be shared in common. What Jesus is saying—in word and deed—with the woman is this: Mountains like Gerizim and Zion, cities like Sychar and Jerusalem will no longer compete for religious superiority. Women and men will no longer be artificially separated. Laws about “who’s in” and “who’s out” will no longer stand. Because of the Living Water that Jesus brings, even regular food and drink will no longer be sources for division, but *resources* for community and life together. And bit by bit, the woman got it. There was some wrangling and debate; she was skeptical. But as she listened to Jesus reveal what he knew about her—without judgment by the way—and as she heard Jesus’ promises about a new day of worship in spirit and truth, she was transformed and empowered. She encountered the Messiah, the one who proclaims the good news about what it really means to worship God. Living water began to

gush all around and within her and even after those hostile disciples came back to the well, she was not deterred. She left her water jar—object of necessity and a daily reminder of her exclusion—and she into town, unfettered, with a voice full of hope and conviction. She didn't care that she'd been excluded. She didn't care that women weren't supposed to speak out in public and had no real legal right to testimony. Jesus crossed boundaries for her, and she was going to cross boundaries for him, and such was her testimony that many Samaritans from Sychar believed in him. Living Water nourished new relationships and ways of being with one another. Hospitality replaced hostility. The woman's testimony drew people back to the well, to this One who just might be the Messiah! And they invited this Jewish man to stay with them, and by staying with them it meant he ate with them, drank with them, shared life together. For two days, hospitality reigned. Hostility and division has no power. Now *that's* worship in Spirit and truth. That's what Jesus was and is all about.

In order to encounter us, Jesus crosses boundaries. All those places we think Jesus shouldn't or wouldn't be...all those places we think Jesus simply isn't? He is. He's there. He is asking for a drink, and he's going to give us living water.

And this living water is grace, and this living water is meant to gush up and around all of us and free us to become boundary-crossers ourselves. I believe Jesus expects us to do what the Samaritan woman did—to take Living Water, drown hostility, and then water seeds of hospitality. We've got to do it: in our marriages, as parents and children, and friends and co-workers, as members of the Body of Christ and citizens of nations. But that requires letting go of prejudices and hardened hearts. That requires crossing chasms of distrust and resentment. That requires confessing, as we have today, that so often our hope is lost and our bones are dried up, that we don't have all the answers, that we're not free of sin in the brokenness around us, and that we need living water to revive our lives.

The world of that woman from Sychar was dominated by false morals and blinding prejudices between Jew and Samaritan, and between male and female, and it was in desperate need of the hospitality that Jesus radically brought. Our world is still in desperate need of that same hospitality. As people showered with Living Water, what will be our testimony in this time and place? How do we as followers of the way of Jesus—the ways of compassion, and inclusion, the ways of mercy and peace—cross the

boundaries like Jesus once did? Knowing that Jesus will always shower us with Living Water...trusting that Jesus will keep crossing any fence we erect, or any boundary we come across... rejoicing that God will always feed us at *the* table of hospitality no matter than hostilities that surround us, how will you and I break down the dividing walls and set tables for fellowship? How will you and I live more faithful lives of inclusion and compassion, mercy, and peace? The Samaritan woman is an amazing model of what happens when Living Water rains down.

Imagine this: It's six in the morning, and the sun is rising. The townswomen of Sychar awaken, dress, and fetch their water jars. Along the way to Jacob's well, they catch up on the last two days' events, inquire about Martha's growing baby and Rachel's still sick husband. They share woes, laugh, probably to gossip a bit, too. A few hours later, it's Noon at Jacob's well. No one's there. *Everyone* fetched their water six hours before.

Amen