

“Living Water” - John 4:5-42

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It's a story of great significance. It's significant that the conversation ever happened. The barriers were widely known among most people. Notably, Jesus was a Jew and the woman was a Samaritan. Between Samaritans and Jews there was a wall of separation no less than what in our time physically separates the Israelis from the Palestinians.

The Jews and Samaritans were related peoples as both were Hebrews. The Samaritans were from the old northern kingdom of Israel, while the Jews were from the old southern kingdom of Judah. The Samaritans inter-married with non-Jewish peoples and lost much of their ethnic identity while the Jews maintained their identity.

Each group ended up with their own temple, the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim, and the Jews on Mount Zion. And so it was an unusual choice for Jesus to travel through Samaria. Jesus having a conversation with a Samaritan was even more unusual.

The conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well of Sychar in Samaria was very significant. In that time and place, men and women were not to talk to one another in public. It was considered improper to do so, especially when a man was like Jesus—a rabbi, a teacher, and someone looked up to as an honored authority. I imagine that when the disciples came to the well, they were astonished that Jesus was speaking with a woman.

I imagine that the disciples were also astonished that the person was a Samaritan woman—someone rejected by her own people. She came to the well to draw water at noon, one of the hottest times of the day. Morning and evening were known to be times to do the hard work of drawing water and hauling it to one's home. This was commonly work that women were to do with one another. But the Samaritan woman went to the well alone, perhaps viewing herself as a misfit and outcast. She may have avoided others in order to not be hurt and rejected again by their words, attitudes, and disapproval.

It was very significant to the Samaritan woman that Jesus promised “living water.” Living water was understood as water that flows, runs, and sparkles. Living water must have been a welcome change to the woman compared to water that often became discolored or even stagnant at other wells.

I imagine that the woman presumed that Jesus was talking about a hidden stream that he knew was much better than the well at Sychar. She desired the water he was offering so that she wouldn't have to travel a great distance to haul buckets from other wells.

But what Jesus promised was a source of “living water” that would touch her heart so that she could truly live. The woman wasn't clear about what that exactly meant, but I imagine that she sensed that the “living water” he described was something that she desperately needed in her life.

It was significant that Jesus knew the details of her life. The details aren't completely understood, but I sense that she was experiencing a very difficult time in her life. She had had five husbands. Perhaps the marriages ended through death, divorce, or desertion—or maybe a combination of those factors? I wonder if they were truly marriages, or relationships of short or long-term convenience? I wonder why the current man she was with was not truly her husband? We don't have answers to these questions, but perhaps we don't need them? Even so, my sense is that the woman felt very alone and exiled from her family, friends, and neighbors.

It was significant that Jesus knew the truth about the woman. She must have been impacted greatly that, knowing the truth, Jesus accepted her. I imagine that it was a divine encounter with a man she believed might be a prophet.

There is another significant occurrence. The woman asked Jesus to resolve the long-standing and divisive question of who was right: the Jews or the Samaritans? It appears that she may have been questioning the correct place to worship—the temple in Gerizim or Jerusalem? And so a significant occurrence happened when Jesus raised the matter to a higher level. True worship would no longer depend on physical location, but would be a matter of spirit and truth.

The experience at the well offered yet another significant occurrence. The woman confessed her faith in a Messiah who was to come, and Jesus said that he was the Messiah. Jesus revealed his most important true self not to his disciples, not to the people of his own Jewish heritage, not to religious leaders, but to a person who was considered marginal three-times-over by her lineage people: a Samaritan, a woman, and at best questionable on her relationships with men. Yet, Jesus entrusted her with his deepest secret, the truth of who he was, is, and always will be: the Messiah!

We also learn in the story that the disciples arrived at the well to offer food for Jesus, the woman leaves her water jar, and runs back to the city of Sychar to proclaim: come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done—the Messiah—the one who offers living water! The crowd that comes to the well is so large that Jesus compares it to a field ready to be harvested — harvested to be followers of him through God, the Father, who sent him.

Here then we have the last significant occurrence. The unlikely person, the Samaritan woman, becomes the key witness in proclaiming the truth about Jesus the Messiah, modeling how any one of us regardless of who we are, what we've done, or how we've been treated can witness about Jesus, too.

Why? Like the woman at the well, we don't have to have our life together in every way. We don't need to know all there is to know. What we are called to simply do is to offer our lives of faith in God and Jesus Christ in the most authentic and honest ways possible with others and then let others make their own choices about life and faith!

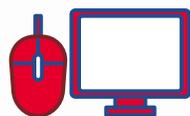
How do we do that? Bruce Larson, in his book Ask Me to Dance, includes a story about a member of his congregation who had come from another country. Pastor Larsen wrote: "Her faith sparkled and the living water of the spirit flowed out of her soul to all around her." He invited her to go with him to a seminar on the topic of evangelism. The leaders had prepared tables filled with all sorts of pamphlets and strategies and demographic studies, all aimed at reaching the un-churched in their area. At some point during the program the leaders turned to this woman and asked her to share some of the reasons that made the church so important and so vital in her home country. At first, she was a bit intimidated by the crowd, but then she had this to say, "Well, we never gave pamphlets to people because we never had any. We just showed people by our life and example what it is like to be a Christian, and when they can see for themselves, then they want to be a Christian, too." (adapted in part from Leading by Example, Bruce Larson)

In this season of Lent and the approaching time of Easter, may your lives be Christian examples of the flowing love of God and Jesus Christ so that others might come to desire "living water," too!

Amen.

Pastor Hoyte Wilhelm

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