

*Third Sunday in Lent*

March 19, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint John. (John 4: 5-42)

[Jesus] came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 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." 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."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know for salvation is from the Jews. 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. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." 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." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus was tired and thirsty at Jacob's well, when a woman appeared. There is a story there. There is history there. About meeting at the well, about the woman at the well.

In ancient times, Abraham left home and family and went in search of God. He lived a lifetime traveling and searching for God. When he was old and his wife Sarah had died, he sent a servant back to his home and family to find a wife for his son Isaac. The servant went. And as he approached Abraham's birthplace, he prayed, "Lord, make something good happen here. I will stand by the well, and if a woman comes, I will ask for a drink. Let the one who gives me a drink be the one for my master's son."

Before the words are even out of his mouth, Rebekah arrives. Surprised, he says, "May I have a drink?" She says, "Yes. And let me get water for your camels, too." Within one day, she is heading back to be Isaac's bride. And it is said, "Isaac married Rebekah and loved her."

A generation later, Isaac and Rebekah's son, Jacob, is travelling east after some unfortunateness with his brother, and he comes to the same well. A young shepherd named Rachel comes to water her flocks. Jacob removed the cover from the well and helped her water her flocks. And Jacob loved Rachel, and worked for her father for fourteen years for the ability to marry her.

Different well, same story, with Moses and Zipporah, his wife. He meets her at the well, helps her water her flocks, and is invited home for dinner. And the rest, they say, is a love story.

Today, we hear Jesus was tired and thirsty at Jacob's well, when a woman appears. It's an old story. Jesus asks her for water, and enters the story. And she, she will have none of it – absolutely none of it. "Who are you?" she says. She gives all the reasons why she shouldn't be part of this old story. "You are Jewish – I'm Samaritan. You're a man – you shouldn't be talking to me. You, sir, don't have a bucket, so don't talk to me about water." All the reasons this meeting at the well should not happen. All the reasons this cannot be a love story.

What are the reasons we give when God calls us into a love story? What reasons do we give to turn away from the God?

“I don’t believe like I used to when I was a kid.” “I’m not good enough, or smart enough, or faithful enough to reach out to God.” “I don’t really know how to pray.” “I don’t agree with the church.” “Real life doesn’t allow time.” “Life is too complicated.” “I’m afraid I might have to look at things about myself I’m ashamed of.” Why do we hide from the God who loves us? Why do we turn away from one who offers living water?

The woman at the well had perfectly logical reasons to keep Jesus at arm’s length. So do we. But Jesus is unperturbed. “Go get your husband,” he says. And in four words speaks her deepest pain. This is a woman who has had five husbands. Now, for years, people have said that this woman is of questionable morals. She runs around with other men. She is unfaithful to her husbands. Perhaps, if it were 2017. But we’re talking about the First Century, when women were slightly less valuable than cattle.

First Century women had no power. They could not marry without permission, and could not divorce their husbands. If she were an immoral woman, they would have killed her: an honor killing. It still happens today. This is not immorality. This is tragedy. Imagine this scenario:

A young woman, a teen, dreams of a beautiful life. She is married to a young man in her village. But after a year there is an uprising near Sychar. He is conscripted into the Roman army to fight. He doesn’t come home. His family takes her in. And when they can afford it, she is given in marriage to another young man. But he is killed in a farming accident. She is sent to live with his brother – a levirate marriage. But after a few years there is sickness in the village, and many die. She is widowed again. A distant cousin takes her as a second wife. But she gives him no children. And he wants sons, so he divorces her. A kind gentleman in the village takes her on as the fourth wife, to clean for him. He was kind, but quite old, and he died. That man’s son let her be part of his household, because there is nowhere else for her to go.

We can barely imagine an era where there is war, and disease, and famine, and life is so hard that a woman could be given to five different husbands. It is no wonder she says, “I have no husband.” This is tragedy. This woman came to the well at noon because she can’t stand the stares and the whispers and the pity. Her life has been tragic. There is no one who wants her, or depends on her, or loves her. Where is her meaning and purpose? She has a thirst for something so much greater than water.

Even in this era, we all thirst for more than water. For what is it that you thirst? What is your deepest desire? Is it purpose? Is it independence or dignity? Is it someone to talk with? Is it something real and true to hold on to? A sense of peace or wholeness? What is your deepest desire? What is your thirst?

There at the well, Jesus does not offer this woman pity or shame or platitudes. He offers her living water. He listens respectfully, treats her like a human who has a voice and a contribution to make. She is not “that foreign woman.” She is a human who is searching for truth, and trying to worship, and hoping for the coming of God.

Jesus listens carefully. And then he speaks deep truth to her: “*I am.*” She is the first to hear Jesus say those two powerful words: “*I am.*” The same words spoken from the burning bush to Moses. The words spoken when a blind man receives sight and Lazarus is called from the grave. Words that make an army fall down before Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

“*I am.*” She hears it. She wrestles with it. She begins to believe it is true. This is not a fully finished faith. This is not a complete systematic theology. But she has found something she knows to be true.

What do you know to be true? We fuss so much about believing the right things, or not believing certain things, or needing to know more. But at the heart of it, what do you know to be true? What do you know from everyday experiences with Jesus, from your conversations with God in prayer, or from honest conversations with others? What do you know from the wrestling and questions of your own life? What do you know to be true? What is the truth that shapes you?

This woman is, by no means, certain. But she has found something true and real. And she is changed by it. She lets down her barriers. She faces her thirst for more. She finds something true in Jesus. And she finds a purpose. She finds worth. She finds something in her life that matters.

She finds so much more than a love story at the well. She finds so much more that she leaves her water jar, her fears and her isolation, there at the well, and goes to give away what she’s found. “*He told me everything I’ve ever done. He can’t be the Messiah, can he?*” Not exactly great theology, or great marketing, for that matter. But it is authentic. She has a story to tell. She has purpose. The change in her and the story of her experience are enough to bring a whole community to the well to enter the love story.

We are all invited to enter the love story, to lay down our excuses, to admit what we yearn for, and to consider what is true and real. We are all invited to speak the truth of our hearts to God and hear God’s words for each of us. We are invited to encounter “*I AM.*” The living God, who goes with us in the future.

We are invited to go and tell, all of us. We all are invited to the well, to enter the love story.

Amen.