

Scripture Lesson: John 4:5-29

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 89

⁵ Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. ⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ For his disciples had gone to the city to buy food. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ 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 gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband,' ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. So what you say is true!" ¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 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". "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." ²⁷ 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?" ²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! Could he possibly be the Messiah?"

John 4:5-29

03/12/2023 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"NCIS Gibbs' Rule #5: Don't Waste Good"

Rev. Amy Terhune

Don't waste good is the rule we're given today, which, on its most basic level means don't waste your gifts, right? As in, we should use the gifts and graces we're given. Which makes sense. After all, the Spirit gives us gifts for a reason – to be part of God's work, to thrive. On a deeper, more theological level, scripture tells us we're created in God's image and called good. Which means it's both a sin and a heresy to look at others or at self as worthless. Our essential goodness is part of our created beingness. None of us are wastes, at least, not in God's eyes. To not waste good is to not belittle the divine image that lives in each of us, but rather, to honor our sacred worth. And finally, to not waste good is to acknowledge that even if the most horrific, abysmal, desperate situations, glimmers of good may emerge within the layers of pain, suffering, and darkness, and may, in fact, be openings where the love of God, the hope, the peace, the healing of Christ Jesus can enter in, and if not redeem, at least, assuage suffering however briefly.

Which I find relevant, looking back today. I don't know how many of you have noted or remembered this – and maybe you don't really want to – but it was three years ago yesterday that everything shut down. Schools, stores, visiting hours at the hospital. We went into lock down for a pandemic March 11, 2020. At the time, we had no idea what we were in for – how long it would take for things to resume, and I say resume rather than go back to “normal” because the pre-pandemic normal doesn't exist, and never will again. It just so happens that the way the calendar fell three years ago, we had the same lesson before as we do today. The very first sermon I preached to an empty sanctuary and a virtual congregation was this record of Jesus' encounter with an empty woman in the heat of the high noon and how he ultimately fills her with living water. Which was startlingly relevant at the time. But it's no less so now. If you haven't already done so, take a breath, slow and deep, and give thanks that such a simple act of life can be done in the presence of others.

But back to our lesson. Jesus has been preaching, healing, and baptizing in and around Judea, and in a rather baffling notation, it seems that the Pharisees start pitting Jesus against John the Baptist to see who more people flock to. And all this, even though John the Baptist has already declared Jesus to be greater and himself to be lesser. But Jesus doesn't want to be a pawn in some kind of religious political turf war, so he decides to head back towards home, which is how it comes to be that he's passing through Samaria on his way back to Galilee. It's the shortest route, and they're on foot. At about noon, Sychar pops up on the horizon. The disciples go into town to get food, but Jesus decides to take a few quiet moments to himself at Jacob's well, and that is when she shows up – this nameless woman coming to get water at noon.

Now, Biblical scholars make a big thing out of that because women don't come to draw water at noon. It's a 120° in the shade at noon in Israel. Women come to draw water at dawn and at dusk, when it's cooler out. They gab, they wash up, they touch base with one another at the start and the close of each day. It's the equivalent of gathering for coffee before work, or catching up with friends to watch the game at the bar after work. It's not just getting water—its social convention. It's part of being in community. But nobody is out at noon except a lone weary traveler. The only reason a woman comes to the well at noon is because she wants to come when no one else is there. She isn't part of the community, or wants no part in the community, or isn't welcomed in the community. Try to imagine, just for a moment, living in a place where you're not welcome. And mind you, she's got no Facebook friends to go home and chat with online. That's a pervasive loneliness.

And she is lonely. Across the years, and largely based on her conversation with Jesus about her marriage, history has judged this woman to be disreputable. She's lewd, unfaithful, easy, sinful – or so goes the traditional interpretation. But that's crap, okay? Remember, that a woman in Israel at that time couldn't get a divorce. Divorce is for men, not women. What we've got here is a woman who has either watched a husband die, or been rejected and booted to the curb not once, not twice, but FIVE times.

We know a good deal more about psychology today than they did then. So ask yourself: what would be the state of this woman's spirit? How much pain can one person carry? How much grief, loss, rejection? How many times can trust be violated before one cannot trust anymore? How many pieces can the heart be broken apart into before it ceases to function anymore? I don't know the answer to that. But as Gail R O'Day points out in her exposition of this text: “Significantly, the reasons for the woman's marital history intrigue commentators, but do not concern Jesus.” [Gail R. O'Day, “The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) pg. 567.] What concerns Jesus is the woman before him. He sees the whole person. He may see a sinner—we all are, after all—but he also sees a casualty of circumstance. He sees the deeper pain; the suffering. He sees how empty this woman has become, her parched existence.

“Give me a drink,” Jesus asks of her, and thus begins the longest one-on-one conversation between Jesus and anyone recorded in all of scripture. She points out the myriad of differences between them—rabbi, Jew, man verses sinner, Samaritan, woman. But since neither of these two function inside normal social parameters, they get past that fairly quickly. “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,” says Jesus. The woman takes his words at face value, almost sneering at him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep,” to which Jesus says, in effect: I beg to differ.

His bucket is standing right in front of him. It’s her, you see. She’s the vessel, the bucket, the empty thing which needs filling. All her life, she been defined by the men around her. For thousands of years, she has remained defined by men who study her. But Jesus will define her by the good within her. He knows she’s not wasted; she’s not trash; she’s not worthless. She’s just dry and empty. And my guess is that some of us get that. She’s tried to fill the emptiness with lovers. She’s not the only one who has ever made that mistake. Others of us try to fill emptiness with work, with wealth, with hobbies, even religion. Long term, it doesn’t work. Which is why Jesus offers living water, and why Jesus offers words of identity.

Not that it’s not immediately obvious in the English, so let me open it up. He calls her “woman.” Big deal, you say. But it is. The Greek word used here is *gynē*. The first time John records that word issuing from the mouth of Jesus is in John 2, where Jesus is at a wedding in Cana of Galilee with his mother and his disciples. His mother comes to tell him that the party has run out of wine. To which Jesus responds, “Woman, what is that to you and to me?” Woman. *Gynē*. Same word. He uses the same term for this Samaritan woman at a well at noon as he does for his own mother. [from Arnold Prater, *The Presence*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993) as used in “The Evangelist Has a Shady Past” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com. Adapted here slightly.]

And he calls her that in reference to a theological question: do we find God on our mountain or yours? Which scholars have traditionally written off as diversionary, but which, in fact, reveal her thirst to fill the emptiness. Today, we don’t really know what to do with her question, because we don’t think like they did two thousand years ago. Our faith isn’t tied to geography. But theirs was, and it’s important to understand that. What Jesus does here, basically, is render the entire theological debate between Jews and Samaritans obsolete. To this woman, Jesus essentially says, “stop focusing on the wrong stuff. Stop focusing on where you are or what you’ve done or how others respond to you. Those things don’t matter—they’ll just drain you more, make you feel emptier. You can’t fill your own emptiness. Focus instead on God. He’ll quench the thirst. Woman, *gynē*, believe me...

And she does. She dares to stretch beyond her shallow existence to the very deeps of faith and trust. And Jesus, who has been exasperated by his own disciples’ failures to comprehend, baffled by how slow Nicodemus is to get it, downright dismissive and infuriated by the Jewish leaders, sees in her – this unnamed, empty woman coming to the well at noon – one who finally gets it!! She knows that the Messiah is coming, the one who will make things clear. And Jesus says, ‘I am’. Don’t get caught up in the English there. In the Greek, it’s just ‘I Am’, which should take you back to Exodus three, where Moses sees a bush on fire but not consumed, and hears the voice of God, the great I AM, inviting him into holy space. “I AM,” says Jesus. The messianic revelation comes to an outcast, gentile, broken woman ready to be a wellspring for God’s grace.

Why her? I don’t know. Maybe because she was empty. Maybe because she was open. All I know is that she believed. And God opened the floodgates, and she went away a new person. Not only that, but this woman, ostracized by the community she lives in, runs back to town to tell people what she’s discovered. She wants to share the good news with the very people who have hurt her for so long. “It is interesting to note that in her enthusiasm to tell her story, she lost the shame of her sin.

She came to the well in solitude; she returns in congregation. She came to the well as one disgraced; she returns as one graced!" [From "Living Water for a Thirsty Soul" by Brett Blair and staff, www.Sermons.com.] She understood that in order for living water to stay life giving, it must flow freely.

I don't know your emptiness, your dryness, your suffering, your brokenness. I don't know your heart, your depth, your needs, your gifts. But I know that you are good, and God doesn't waste good. We come to the well today in need of the living waters of grace, healing, and hope. God baptizes us and lifts us into new life. God offers to fill us, carry us through rough waters, calm our storms, quench our thirst, dry our tears, and water the seeds of hope. And God dares to use our gifts, our goodness, even our brokenness to heal the world, which means that the empty vessel God could tap to share living water with the world might just be you... if you'll let him. Amen.