

<sup>5</sup> Jesus 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. <sup>7</sup> A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." <sup>8</sup> For his disciples had gone to the city to buy food. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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 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." <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. So what you say is true!" <sup>19</sup> The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup> Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." <sup>25</sup> The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming". "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." <sup>26</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." <sup>27</sup> 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?" <sup>28</sup> Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, <sup>29</sup> "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! Could he possibly be the Messiah?"

John 4:5-29

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"Into the Heat"

Rev. Amy Terhune

There's an old story about a conversation between a US Naval Ship and what was believed to be a Canadian fishing vessel off the coast of Newfoundland. In the most recent version circulating the internet, the captain of the USS Lincoln became aware of the other vessel directly in its path and sent a message to the other vessel to divert its course 15 degrees south to avoid collision. To his shock and dismay, the other sent back a message recommending that the warship divert its course 15 degrees north. Well, US Naval captains don't alter their course for fishing boats, so the captain responded: "This is the Captain of a US Navy ship. I say again, divert your course 15 degrees south. Came the response: "Negative. Divert your course 15 degrees north."

The captain became quite frustrated and sent another message: “This is the aircraft carrier USS Lincoln, the second largest ship in the United States’ Atlantic Fleet. We are accompanied by three destroyers, three cruisers and numerous support vessels. I demand that you change your course 15 degrees south—that’s one five degrees south—or countermeasures will be undertaken to ensure the safety of our ships.”

Once again, came a reply: “This is the Cape Race Lighthouse. Recommend you divert your course 15 degrees north, but it’s your call.” [from Bob Deffinbaugh, illustrations on John 4:5-42, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com) and from the internet, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/the-obstinate-lighthouse>.]

Apparently, US Naval captains do alter their course for lighthouses—or so the story goes. This story is believed to have first appeared in Reader’s Digest more than a half a century ago. Snopes.com reports that the story itself is not true, but admits that this fact alone doesn’t make it any less humorous. But on another level, this story is most certainly true—not the facts, of course—but the predicament. Sometimes we are the last to realize that the change which needs to be made is not in our external environment or in others around us—the needed change must be within our own selves.

Lent is about repenting – about turning and returning and allowing Jesus to change us from the inside out. In our lesson this morning, which I admit is one of my all-time favorites, we meet a woman changed from the inside out – one who leaves behind the rocky shoals of self-destruction for the deep waters of faith and new life.

Our lesson opens today as Jesus is heading back home from Jerusalem. He cuts through Samaria, which is the shortest route, rather than returning home along the Jordan riverbank, which was the safer route. About midday, he finds himself at Jacob’s well in Sychar. The disciples go into town to find food, but Jesus stays out in the midday heat, perhaps seeking a bit of shelter from a thatched roof or a few trees over the well, and as he waits, a woman comes to draw water. At noon. People 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. But she comes at noon. She isn’t welcome in the company of the other women, or she wants no part of them. Either way, she’s alone... profoundly, glaringly, agonizingly alone. All of us can remember experiences where we felt left out, excluded, not welcome. The kid that doesn’t get invited to the birthday party with the rest of the class. The boy in the shadows by the wall at the high school dance. The young woman taking a moment in the restroom to collect herself before going back to the office where none of her older male colleagues take her or her ideas seriously.

I can just imagine this woman’s chagrin as she approaches the well and sees Jesus sitting there. She can tell he’s a Jew. She just wants to get her water and get out of there, so imagine her shock when he speaks to her – a man addressing a woman, a Jew addressing a Samaritan, a respectable leader addressing someone with her reputation. But I’m intrigued by what Gail O’Day writes in her commentary about this exchange. She references the betrothal scenes of the Hebrew Scriptures – Rebecca, Leah, Zipporah – all of whom encounter their future husbands at the well. Jesus doesn’t come to be her newest husband, but he does come to be the bridegroom of God’s people. Writes O’Day, “the Messiah comes not only to Israel, but also to those whom Israel marginalizes and despises. Unlike the Old Testament well scenes, Jesus does not come to the well looking for a bride, but for a witness who will recognize the Messiah and bring the despised people to him. What is most astonishing [here] is the fact that a Samaritan woman becomes that witness.” [from 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. 565.]

“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, but since neither of these two functions 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. She, and thousands like her, are the very people Jesus came to heal, to fill, to restore to wholeness, to fill with living water that nourishes the driest soul. Because you and I are not born to be empty inside. Famed 17<sup>th</sup> century mathematician and scientist Blaise Pascal wrote in his *Pensees*, “There is a God shaped void in the heart of everyone which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.”

[<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/801132-there-is-a-god-shaped-vacuum-in-the-heart-of-each>]

The woman at the well would have known the truth of Pascal’s words, because heaven knows, she’s tried to fill that void. Jesus goes out into the desert, into a foreign land, into the noonday heat to find that witness that will open the floodgates on the land. And when she doesn’t immediately understand, Jesus doesn’t give up on her. Instead, Jesus switches tacks. “Go call her husband.” What I love about this woman is that she’s transparent. She’s got gumption, but maybe she also has nothing left to lose. There is no husband. There are five former husbands and one she hasn’t bothered to marry. Now lest you want to call her some rather unsavory names for women who sleep around, it is worth noting that the scripture does not tell us that’s what she’s been doing. It’s not fair to label her that way. Furthermore, let me remind you that in ancient Israel at this time, women could not get a divorce. Only men could do that. Which means that she has either been widowed or abandoned five times. What does that do to a person’s wellbeing? To their self-image? And if a woman in that culture can’t survive without male support, how quickly does her situation become dire and desperate? 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? How far will a desperate woman go to survive? 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.]

Christian tradition across the centuries has been unkind her. Difficult is the nicest word to describe how tradition has understood her. But I can only conclude that Jesus sees beyond her desperation, beyond her despair, beyond her brokenness. What concerns him is the woman standing before him. That empty bucket desperate to be filled. He sees the whole person. He sees sin, to be sure, but He also sees the deeper pain; the suffering. He sees how empty this woman has become, her parched existence.

She had moved from one relationship to the next, searching for intimacy, connection, love. If that doesn’t translate to a modern world, I don’t know what does. I remember having a conversation with a sorority sister my junior year in college. Junior year was a rough year for me for a lot of reasons, but sorority sister was a senior, and things were even worse for her. This particular night, she came home in tears and fled to her room. When I went up to comfort her, I learned that her boyfriend had broken up with her. They’d been high school sweethearts—gone to prom together; dated all the way through undergrad. We were all expecting them to announce their engagement anytime now.

But here she was, a month out from graduation, still trying to find a job, and she was suddenly on her own. She said to me, "I don't know who I am, now." Which was painfully honest... and heartbreaking.

My guess is that *the Woman at the Well* defined herself by who she was with, so every time a relationship fell apart, she lost herself all over again. Some people fill the void with wealth. Some with lovers. Some with hobbies. Some with work. Some even fill it with religion. But Jesus says: let God fill it with his Spirit. Let God tell you who you are.

Which, by the way, is exactly what Jesus does. But it's not immediately obvious in the English. He calls her "woman." Big deal, you say. But it is. Bible scholars tell us that the Greek word for woman, *gynē*, is used here. This is not a term used for scolding or contempt. It's a term of respect and endearment. We first encounter that word in John 2. Jesus uses the term in addressing his mother before turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana. Jesus uses the same word to address the woman at the well. He tells her she matters. He tells her she's more than she thinks. He tells her she's respectable, she's precious, she's valued. He tells her she doesn't have to spend the rest of her life as an empty husk waiting for someone else to fill her inadequately and imperfectly. She can be a vessel for the spirit, for the truth, for the abundant love of God. 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 fill the emptiness. He'll sate the void. He'll quench the thirst. Woman, *gynē*, believe me...

And she does. Because he names her as special, she is able to accept the challenge to live deeper than her shallow existence. In naming her special, she finds herself, and is moved to accept what Jesus has to offer. She knows that the Messiah is coming, the one who will make things clear. And Jesus says, 'I am.' And she hears the depth in that – the being of God in Christ Jesus. And she goes out to share that new-found relationship, that living water that's filled her emptiness. She comes to the well alone, but returns in congregation. She comes to the well desperate but returns as one filled with hope and assurance. She comes to the well with the burden of disgrace and pain. But she returns as one healed and graced.

That story speaks to me because I know what it's like to be running on empty. I know what's like to be left out and left alone. I know what it's like to not be sure of who I am. I know what it's like to be tired and worn down and hollow inside. I know what it's like to feel drained. And even though it feels like it sometimes, I'm guessing I'm not the only one. All around, there are others who don't believe they amount to anything—that they are null and void when it comes to God's grace. Which is also discouraging...and draining...and disheartening. But Jesus goes out into the wilderness, into the darkness night, into the crushing heat of the day to seek us out, to engage our faith, to fill the deep reservoir in the soul. And just when I'm inclined to throw my hands up and remind God that the problems are big and the disparity is wide and the well is deep and you have no bucket, God looks at me and God smiles and says to me: I beg to differ.

Amen.