

“Conversation at the Water Cooler”

John 4: 5-42

“Gathering water from the well. Can you imagine what that must have been like? First of all, you had no other water available in the house except what you brought from the well, Second, the well was not exactly next door, but was quite a walk away. Third, it was the women who had the job of bringing the water.”
(Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible, John, volume, story by Dennis E. Smith and Barbara McBride-Smith)

On the other hand, going to the well, first thing in the morning, was good opportunity to visit with the other women of the town.

But this woman did not come for her water, in the morning. She came at noon, the hottest part of the day.

That was because she was not accepted by the other women in the town, even though they had the same task. This woman was, well, a “moral outcast.” She was living with a man to whom she was not married, but she had been married five times,.

Public opinion, at that time, was much different than now, on that topic. And yet, then or now, we can’t get it right. Couldn’t someone have just helped that woman, or one in that situation, get her life right? Nope. Then, people were horrified. Now, people are indifferent and/or approving. Neither one is helpful.

But, that day something else happened, which changed and healed that woman at the well. She met someone! She met Jesus.

That is a changing and healing experience for anyone and everyone who meets Jesus.

Jesus had not come to the well to draw water. He had simply sat down there, to rest, while his disciples went to buy food.

To back up a little, we will need some background info. This place was Samaria, the middle part of Israel. Jesus and his disciples were passing through, on their way north to the area of Galilee.

The thing was, the Samaritans and the Jews (including the Jews from Galilee) had a bitter, hateful relationship. It was based on some historical and religious

issues, and was at least four hundred years old. Each side was hanging on to their grudge very tightly.

Jesus was there, anyway. He was tired, and he wanted a drink of water. So, he asked the woman for a drink.

This was shocking, for two reasons. First was the antagonism between the Jews and the Samaritans. The woman even remarked on that. So, in that way, Jesus was breaking down a barrier. (The Gospel of John, volume 1, by William Barclay)

She might not have known the second reason it was shocking, because she did not know who Jesus was. He was a teacher, also called rabbi.

That“was still another way in which Jesus was taking down the barriers. The Samaritan was a woman. The strict Rabbis forbade a Rabbi to greet a woman in public. A Rabbi might not even speak to his own wife or daughter or sister in public. There were even Pharisees who were called ‘the bruised and bleeding Pharisees’ because they shut their eyes when they saw a woman on the street and so walked into walls and houses! For a Rabbi to be seen speaking to a woman in public was the end of his reputation—and yet Jesus spoke to this woman.” (Barclay)

She probably was not used to anyone speaking to her in public.

As they discussed the getting water situation, the conversation developed in another surprising way: they got into theology. That was surprising because the customs did not allow that, either. “The Rabbis so despised women and so thought them incapable of receiving any real teaching that they said: “Better that the words of the law should be burned than deliver[ed] to women.” They had a saying: “Each time that a man prolongs converse with a woman he causes evil to himself, and desists from the law, and in the end inherits Gehinnom.” BY Rabbinic standards Jesus could hardly have done a more shatteringly unconventional thing than to talk to this woman. “ (Barclay)

Well! In my humble opinion, that was just wrong on the part of those rabbis! More importantly, though, Jesus corrected that, in this conversation.

Now, they had to clear up what “living water” meant first. Was it running water, over a stream-bed, as opposed to standing water, like, say, this well’s water? No.

Jesus had the other meaning in mind. You see, “the Jews had another way of using the word *water*. They often spoke of the *thirst* of the soul for God; and they often spoke of quenching that thirst with *living water*. . . . At the heart of all this there is the fundamental truth that in the human heart there is a thirst for something that only Jesus Christ can satisfy.” (Barclay)

Finally, in the conversation, Jesus revealed himself to be the Messiah, the Savior whom God had promised the Savior for whom the people of Israel, including the Samaritans, had waited.

Well, that was so astonishing that the woman left her water jar, and went to the town, to all those people who looked down on her, and told them “Here is a man who knew everything I had ever done! Could he be the Messiah?”

Well, whaddya know, a woman is the first one to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah! (Rachel Conrad Wahlberg)

Not only that, the whole town seemed to draw near to Jesus, spend time with him, learn from him, and be convinced that he was the Messiah.

Some of the best evangelists I have ever known have been like that woman—regular people so happy and surprised to have taken Jesus for their Lord and Savior, that they just have to share the news!

This episode in Jesus’ life is not really counted as a miracle, or a cure. But maybe it was. Enemies were getting along better, and a woman with a world of hurt was healed by an encounter with Jesus.

I did find the woman’s side of it, if you would like to hear it. (Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible, New Testament Women, volume 13, story by Phyllis Williams Kumorowski.)

“Deborah, Sarah, I am so glad to finally be able to *tell* someone exactly how it happened!”

The three Samaritan woman, baskets and buckets strewn aside, huddled excitedly at the well.

“Slow down, Elizabeth, and tell us *everything!* I want to hear every detail! You say it happened right here? Yesterday afternoon?”

Elizabeth, daughter of Samuel the tentmaker, began to speak. “Yes. I was sitting right here on the edge of the well. Actually, I wasn’t in a very good mood. It had been a terrible morning. Avram and I had had a terrible argument. Then, as always, he just left in the middle of it to go wall wailing or read a good scroll or something manly like that, and I was left to do all those trivial little feminine things at home.”

“Like scrubbing the floor,” Deborah said with understanding.

“And loading up the wood for the fire,” Sarah added.

“And [so many other things], she pointed to the bucket at her feet, “and walking a half mile to haul water enough for us all.”

Her friends nodded sympathetically and she continued.

“So there I was at the well, grumbling to myself when this man I’d never seen before walked right up to me . . .”

“A man? Here? What was he doing here? They have their own space.” . . .

“Exactly.” Elizabeth was beginning to feel better.

“He talked to you—without anyone else around?” This was the juiciest gossip Deborah had heard all day.

“Yes, dear. I thought it was pretty presumptuous, too, Humph. Like I don’t have trouble enough with the one I’ve got. Well, as I was saying, this Jewish man . . .”

“Jewish?”

“Did I stutter?”

Sarah was aghast. She had missed this part of the story. “A Jewish man talked to you? Jewish—as in a Jerusalem worshiper?”

“Yes! That’s what I’m trying to tell you! Not only a man, but a foreigner, too, walked right up to the well.”

“How presumptuous!” “This is not their territory! “Cheeky!”

The women were enjoying this.

“He probably came to be sure you were doing it right,” Sarah noted. . . .

“So, what did he want?”

Elizabeth motioned them closer. “Well, first he asked for a drink of water.”

“I told you so!” Deborah announced with a flourish. “That’s men for you—always wanting us to do something for them that they could do themselves!”

“Humph! A come on; that’s what it was! . . .said Sarah . . .

“No,” Elizabeth answered thoughtfully. “Actually, that’s when it got a little strange. He said he want to give me some water.”

“From the well?” Deborah asked.

“No, he called it living water.”

Deborah frowned, “Water with living things—in it?”

Her reverie broken, Elizabeth turned to her friend. “Honestly, Deborah, sometimes you’re worse than a child! He was being serious.”

“All right,” she conceded. “So, what’s living water.?”

“I think he was talking about God.”

Sarah interrupted her. “Why would a Jewish man talk to a Samaritan woman about God? It doesn’t even make any sense. My own husband won’t even talk to me about something so . . .deep, so important.”

“That’s just it! Why not? Isn’t our God the God of all of us? This man was different from any man I’ve ever met. I believe he might have been sent to us by God. I believe he is the Messiah.”

“The Messiah! Here?” For once in her life, Sarah found herself speechless.

“I just don’t buy it, Elizabeth,” she said, shaking her head. “Even it, by some miracle, this man *were* the Messiah, *why* would he talk to a woman? And if he *were* to talk to a woman, I can’t imagine why—no offense, Elizabeth, but . . .”

“Why would he talk to me?”

“Nothing against you personally, Elizabeth; you’re my friend, but, well, you haven’t exactly led a . . . spiritual life, if you know what I mean. If he really wanted to start including women in the theological discussion, wouldn’t the Messiah have spent some time in selecting the woman to whom he was going to speak?”

Elizabeth flushed and answered softly, remembering the gentle stranger’s pointed remarks. “I think he knew exactly what I was like.” She struggled for the right words, gaining momentum and strength as the reality of her insight grew clearer. “I think that may even be why he chose me. Maybe the household of God is not about how much we know, or what race or sex we happened to be born—not even what choices we may have made in the past. Maybe that’s his point—to get past those differences. Maybe that’s *how* we can begin to worship God in spirit and truth the way he said.”

“All right!” said Deborah. “You win! . . . It sounds like you were really convinced by this Messiah.”

“Is that what you told the men?” asked Sarah.

“Yes,” said Elizabeth, “but they didn’t really take me seriously—not until they met him themselves. Then they too came to believe he was the Messiah.”

“So,” said Sarah, “if they decided he was the Messiah—and he taught that God accepts us all equally—I guess that means things are really going to change for us around here.”

“Not a chance,” Elizabeth said drily. “Not until they get it into their heads *and* hearts, but it will happen. It will happen some day.”

How about now, and here? How about we and everyone realize that Jesus came for all of us, no matter what, no matter who? That is what we believe. Amen.

Preached by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters, March 15, 2020