

# Lent: From Division to Community

## The Samaritan Woman at the Well

John 4:5-42 Exodus 17:1-7  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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As a confirmed, card-carrying introvert, I'm a pro at practicing social distancing. It has always just come naturally to me. But the new-normal for the next few weeks or so will put a strain on us all, even those of us who are introverts. I am here at the church this morning preaching this sermon to an empty sanctuary. No, I'm not living out a pastor's worst nightmare, it's because our country does not yet have handle on how to deal with the novel coronavirus, a disease now called COVID-19, which is sweeping across the world. Therefore, following the lead of almost all social gatherings in this country, **the Session of the church deemed it wise to take the appropriate precautionary measures to cancel all church activities for the next two weeks, including next Sunday.** We will reassess at that point.

It will be an interesting study to see how people manage what has basically become self-isolation. During this season of Lent, however, a little extra time to slow down our hectic pace of life and do a little more reflecting upon our own life and journey of faith can be a good thing. Forced isolation, however, is rarely, if ever, a good thing. And as we will see, our Gospel reading this morning from John 4, the story known as **The Samaritan Woman at the Well**, is a study about a person in forced isolation.

Jesus provides a good lesson that we can apply to our own issues of moving from the divisions that isolate us from others into an experience of genuine community. To do this, Jesus challenges the social and religious norms of his day, and we'll explore how we can do the same. Also, we'll try to unpack the meaning of the metaphor "living water," and explore how that can lead to a transformation in our own lives. To put it most simply, **this story is a reflection upon human need, God's grace, transformation, and reconciliation.**

It's a story that at first seems to be about actual physical thirst, but then reveals its deeper meaning about spiritual thirst. On a very deep level, I would suspect that we are *all* spiritually thirsty. We reflected upon that last Sunday when looking at how the Pharisee Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of darkness as a spiritual seeker. The woman at the well becomes a spiritual seeker, as well.

Interestingly, today's story is the longest recorded dialogue between Jesus and anyone else in the Bible – a conversation between a Jewish male religious leader and an unnamed marginalized woman from a despised people, the Samaritans. In our day and age, we unfortunately miss the extent of what an incredibly scandalous story this was to those first readers of John's gospel. **This story starts with how Jesus transforms traditional social and religious conventions and expectations. He does this by challenging the status quo.** But let us not exclude ourselves from that, for we need our own long-held traditional thoughts and practices challenged.

So, how does that work in this story? First of all, Jesus' request of the Samaritan woman, "Give me a drink," was a very serious violation of the social and religious customs of their day. Jews would not drink out of a Samaritan cup because they considered all

Samaritans to be unclean. Therefore, anything they touched would also be unclean. Second, it was improper for a man (especially a rabbi) to talk to any woman in public. This is supported in the story itself by the “astonishment” of the disciples when they returned later and saw that Jesus had been speaking with a woman.

We must not underestimate the impact of these introductory verses in this story. The status quo was indeed severely challenged by Jesus. In and through this encounter, **Jesus acts with obvious intention to break down traditional, socially acceptable prejudices and dividing lines between males and females, between people of opposing nationalities, and of differing religious traditions.** This, in and of itself, makes this story very relevant in our own day and age, where there is still inequality between the genders, between people who look and speak differently and who are not “from here,” and with those who don’t believe what we believe.

So, before we even get to the issue of living water and what that means, **we are challenged to consider what customs and prejudicial traditions of our day need to be challenged, transformed, even overturned.** What current socially acceptable barriers and dividing lines that alienate and isolate others are we, as the people of God and followers of Jesus, called to break through and tear down? Then, do we have the courage and passion to work towards those ends, regardless of the shock and protest of many folks who represent certain traditional elements of church and society, and especially of those who hold on so tightly to what many of us consider prejudicial practices and attitudes? But let’s also turn that back on ourselves, casting ourselves in the role of the Samaritan woman, rather than Jesus.

What rules, traditions, customs or conventions might Jesus have to cross and disregard in order to speak to us, you and me? **What lines is Jesus stepping across in order to speak about what truly matters, and what may transform our lives? Perhaps it involves, in part, our own sense of entitlement, including our own hard-to-admit sense of male privilege, white privilege, economic privilege, and yes, Christian privilege.**

Let’s get to the heart of the matter in this story: the issue of water. Jesus, after requesting a drink of water, speaks to the woman about “living water.” Similar to how Nicodemus misunderstands when he was told about being born again (or anew, or from above), the woman at the well also misunderstands Jesus, hearing his words only on a literal level. This element of misunderstanding Jesus is a common literary technique used by the author of the Gospel of John. It reveals our own tendency to misunderstand, perhaps to take things too literally, and therefore our own need to learn more and dig deeper.

The phrase, “living water,” can also mean on a literal level in the Greek, “running water,” as in a stream, or from an upwelling spring. Most importantly, its water is fresh, easily accessible, and always available. **As a metaphor, living water represents God's love, grace, and Sacred Presence in our lives. It flows freely, is readily available, and has the power to transform lives.** It is in the recognition that God loves and blesses you and I that our lives are transformed.

Clear flowing **spring water**, again on a literal level, is meant to contrast with the kind of water that is found in a well. **Well water**, as opposed to spring water, is stagnant and confined, often filled with impurities, and it takes a lot of effort to make it available. So, for example, **experiencing a new progressive approach to understanding scripture, theology, and the role of the church has been for most of us like the living water of a fresh flowing spring. And many of us now see a traditional dogmatic approach to Christianity as outdated, confining, and like the stagnant waters found in a well.**

I don't mean that as fighting words, but simply as a reflection of a reality that a growing number of people experience. It's about believing the church of the future will be more relational, more diverse, more collaborative, more hopeful, more welcoming, and more agile. It's about the revitalization, the re-formation, and the necessary transformation that must take place for organized religion to become relevant again to a greater number of people in today's culture.

Getting back to our story, the Samaritan woman asks for this living water, misunderstanding it to mean nothing more than the equivalent of a faucet in her kitchen so that she won't have to keep coming back to the well. Yet, even though she does not understand exactly what Jesus has to offer, she understands that he offers something that she needs. She becomes, like Nicodemus, a seeker! And though many people today are increasingly leery about organized religion (and understandably so), they also somehow know that God has something to offer that they need. So we, as a congregation, must constantly address this issue of how to reach these seekers, especially those who have realized the nurturing benefits of belonging to a community of faith. It is our goal to be a safe and nurturing place where people are welcome to come as they are – just as Jesus welcomed the woman at the well as she was, without imposing a sense of guilt and shame – something of which the Church is definitely guilty. Know, therefore, that wherever you are from, whatever your background, whatever you believe, you are welcome here, as you are! Yet, like the woman at the well (you knew there was going to be a 'yet' didn't you), it is also our intention and hope to be ever-transforming into a loving and compassionate people with a passion for social justice and reconciliation.

When this story begins, the woman at the well is an outsider. She is isolated from her own community, as witnessed by her coming to the well alone during the heat of the day instead of with other women in the village when it was cooler. But by the end of the story she becomes a very effective witness – an evangelist – to the transformative and reconciling power of God's love and grace, as expressed by and through the words and actions of Jesus.

With a thousand more things that can and should be said about this remarkable story, I want to make the following proclamation. **By virtue of our belief that the Sacred Presence of God already dwells within us, and all people, and that God is a part of who we are from our very creation, it is our deep understanding that each of us already has access to this "living water." It's not a matter, therefore, of receiving something from without, but rather digging deep within ourselves to let that living water of God's Sacred Presence run freely.** But perhaps that living water is being held back by a dam of some kind within us, either by our own or society's making. If so, let's work to break down those barriers.

And remember, this living water is not meant to be kept confined and stagnant, like well water. Rather, it is to be like accessible, never-ending fresh spring water that flows out freely – freely from ourselves to others. Why? Because ultimately God is the source, not us! And it is in our response to this gift, in and through how we live our lives, not in isolation but in a community of reconciliation, that we share a cup of that water with others.

And know that God is with us and for us during this time of social distancing, drawing us always into community!

Amen.