

THE INNER PATH TO GREATER FULFILLMENT

John 4: 5-42

If only I had more money... If only I had a bigger and better house... If only I was healthier... If only I was more attractive... If only I had a better job... If only I had more friends... If only my children were more thankful and attentive... If only my parents appreciated me more... If only I had a better love life... If only there was less conflict in my life and in my world... If only... I'm sure we all could fill in the blanks according to what "if onlys" matter to us... But here's the thing. Too often, much of our focus is on the outside. If enough things changed on the outside for us... if the right things changed on the outside for us... life would be just perfect!

But you know what? Unless we find inner fulfillment, inner freedom, inner empowerment, purpose and peace... unless we find any of that on the inside, not only will outside change not give us greater fulfillment in a lasting way, but unless our inside changes, we will never find the confidence and motivation to change the outside toward greater fulfillment either.

Ok Preacher, you need to explain. Some of us here may get what I'm saying and some of us may not. OK, then, let's dive into our gospel reading in search of what Jesus has to offer as revelatory wisdom. There may be many different ways toward fulfillment. But Jesus offers a way that involves a relationship with him. And in order to understand what this means in a way that can be personal for each of us, let's ponder our gospel reading more closely.

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus takes a shortcut through Samaritan territory. There at the market square there is a well where people can fill up with water. There Jesus encounters a woman. In order to appreciate how radical this encounter is, in order to appreciate why a whole chapter of this gospel is taken up with this encounter, we need to understand several things.

First of all, the woman has many things going against her that would prevent such an encounter with Jesus ever taking place. She is a woman. Men don't talk to women in that time or place separately from their husbands or separately from a male of her family because that may be interpreted as provocative. Women have a very practical role and function to play, especially when in public. They are not to be engaged as spiritual persons with their own minds and hearts, and especially in public.

Second, she is a Samaritan. Samaritans and Jews have a long-standing feud and they hate each other. Jesus is a Jew. Why would Jesus engage not only a woman, but a Samaritan woman?

Third, she is a morally compromised woman. She has had five husbands and the man she is currently living with is not her husband. Had her husbands died? Had they divorced her? The fact that this has happened to her and that she is willing to live in a relationship where she is not married and therefore in a very vulnerable state legally speaking... this tells us she has been humiliated and degraded by what's happened in her relationships. She is desperate enough to live and serve a man who has not married her and therefore offers her no legal security. She is morally judged by society. Society sees her as cursed by God because of her lifestyle and because of what's happened to her. The problem has to be her. If she is divorced then her husbands obviously found things about her that were displeasing or deficient. If they had died then she is cursed in some way and probably deservedly so, especially as this has happened not once or twice, but five times!

So why would Jesus engage a woman, a Samaritan woman, and a woman who is so morally compromised? How could this give Jesus any credibility socially and religiously speaking? Clearly his disciples don't understand what he's doing having this conversation with this woman unless he's in need of some practical help they aren't aware of. It makes no sense given the society and culture they inhabit.

But here's the thing. If the gospel is all about offering a way to fullness beginning with those who feel like they've hit rock bottom, then this story has much to teach us all. Some of us may have been through our own difficulties and maybe are currently going through real difficulties, but most of us have not hit rock bottom in terms of social condemnation and humiliation as this woman. Maybe we can learn something about ourselves and our relationship with Jesus by pondering what happens to this woman.

So then, the first point we need to understand and absorb about this story is that this woman and Jesus are at totally different ends of the social spectrum, and yet, Jesus is the one who very intentionally chooses to reveal himself to her in a profound way. What's the message here?

Jesus offers a vision for life. If we embrace this vision, we also embrace Jesus. This vision is all about love, but love very specifically defined and understood. It's easy to love those who love us back. It's even easy to love attractive, beautiful, important people who can really benefit us. But true love that follows Jesus' way is about reaching out past the walls that separate us as human beings.

What separates us from those around us? Can you think of specific examples in your life? Jesus demonstrates love by choosing to reveal his nature as living water to a woman, a Samaritan woman, a morally compromised and fallen woman, and a woman who is socially humiliated and condemned. What he does is his message. The living water she is receiving and drinking is the

loving attention from a man who is a prophet and more than a prophet, speaking to her and engaging her. He is taking her seriously and treating her with respect and dignity. Even as she is a woman, a Samaritan, and a person with a troubled history and a shameful past, she is being offered living water if she will drink it. She is infinitely precious and valuable before God. She will know and experience this love because Jesus treats her that way.

So, are we going to follow Jesus? What is the quality of our love, not only with friends but with those who are not friends, those who are, perhaps, even enemies? Do we treat them with dignity and respect? This doesn't mean we let our guard down. We need to be vigilant and we need to hold people accountable. But we can let go our hate and our need to cause pain for the pain we have experienced. We can forgive even if the person isn't prepared to seek for forgiveness. We can fight for justice without turning it into retaliation and revenge by treating the other as a human being no matter what they've done or what side they're on.

And this is also the case with those whose views we don't agree with, those whose attitudes, lifestyles and habits trigger us negatively. Do we create walls in response to their negativity and flaws? How are we the servants of the living water who is Jesus?

And this brings me to the last point. What effect does Jesus love shown to this woman have on the woman? He invites her to be a worshipper of a God who is not only the God of Jews, and not only a God to Samaritans either... no. This God is a God who shows no partiality for anyone, who loves everyone equally and infinitely. This God receives her fully as a woman, a Samaritan, morally fallen and the victim of tragedy and shame. Any change, transformation and empowerment she will experience will come out of the seed of such radical love planted in her. If she drinks from this divine well, she will not only quench her inner thirst, but she will have water to offer others on the outside also.

And so, she does. She leaves Jesus and goes and boldly proclaims Jesus in public without shame. Think about it. She goes out to the market square and talks to people about Jesus. Past any shame or humiliation that would keep her silent and away from the crowds, shame and humiliation she will have carried all these years... past any reluctance to speak publicly as a woman, she boldly chooses to be a witness of Jesus the messiah-saviour.

And does it work? We read: "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony." Even though Jesus is a Jew and they are Samaritans, Jesus has broken down the walls. He broke them down through his love. His love was shown first to a woman totally marginalized and put down. She felt put down because she was put down. Jesus raised her up by revealing himself as living water to her. As she was raised up she was emboldened to go out and proclaim the good news. Others received this news and came to drink from Jesus who was an outsider to them. You see how gospel-love works?

Now, Jesus would say to us: go and do likewise. If you want to follow me, go and do what the woman did. Speak about me through my love in you. Show me to others through such love moving into the world and in your relationships. Where do we need the living water to refresh us, to fill us to overflowing? Where do we need forgiveness, repentance, empowerment, openness and compassion? Where do we need divine patience toward others? Where do we need the kind of love that could speak truthfully and hold others to account in a way they can hear it because there is loving concern in it rather than spite? Where do we need fear in us to fall away and anxiety in us to find some faith to work itself through constructively?

Unless we find the living water and drink from it internally, our search for quenching our thirst through external things will always leave us thirsty. Only by the internal drink of God's powerful love experienced through prayer, worship, meditation, meaningful connections and more, will we also have water to give to others and refresh our world.

Let us pray: We are thirsty, O God... But we know what kind of water we need... quench our thirst again and again with your love in us and through us into the world... Amen.