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Homily Lent A3
Ex 17:1-7, John 4:5-42

A Spring of Living Water

During the season of Lent, we are privileged to hear full episodes from Jesus' ministry. This does give us rather long Gospel passages, but they are well structured and deeply meaningful. In John's Gospel, these episodes often take their cue from an intimate conversation between Jesus and another character. That is certainly the case today with the story of the *Samaritan Woman at the Well*.

Now this particular story contains a dialogue with a long string of double meanings and misunderstandings. The name of the Samaritan city of Sychar comes from a word that means wage, drink, food, or protection. It means these things because most people in Jesus' time lived day to day in a barter economy. Very few people actually had or used much money. Laborers were compensated in three ways: with water, with food, or with protection. So when Jesus asks, "give me drink," AT SYCHAR, John is playing on this double meaning. Then the water metaphor is extended throughout the passage, first with the references to the well, and especially to Jacob's Well – all with double meanings.

From here the conversation spools out in an almost comic fashion. Like a farce on stage, they seem to be talking past each other. Until Jesus begins to sense exactly where this conversation needs to go, and the repartee gets *personal*. "Call your husband.. haven't got one... that's right, five down, one to go..." She tries to change the subject. "Are you a prophet? We have an altar at this special mountain we worship on... we pray THERE... that's where granny always told us we should pray... what's YOUR church like?" Nothing like bringing up RELIGION to divert the conversation! But Jesus is on to this game: "This is about Spirit, not altars, and God is looking for SPIRIT people now not RELIGION people: THAT's what matters." "Oh yes, that's right rabbi, we too know about the Messiah who is coming... he'll straighten all this out for us. Phew!" Interrogation over. But NO. Looking straight at her, Jesus says: "The Messiah is speaking to you NOW." Uh-oh. Here ends to farce. It is time for action. Life is about to get real, not so funny anymore. (NT Wright, Twelve Months of Sundays, pp. 44-45)

I have to say a word about this Samaritan woman, because the tradition of interpretation has been off base and unjust to her. Yes, she is a Samaritan; a heretic and traitor to the Jews of that day. Yes, she is a woman out in public by herself in the middle of the day (which is still illegal again in some countries today). By interacting with her, Jesus (as a man and a Jew) is breaking all sorts of rules of propriety. Her solitary trip, in the middle of the day, reveals something about her status in this town: people either shun her, fear her, or they don't like her. (Women would have gone together to the village well to collect water, early in the day when it was cooler.) Of course it may be the other way around: maybe she fears or dislikes the other women. In any event, the tradition has preferred the first interpretation: that she is disreputable. The conversation about five husbands, and a sixth one she is not married to, has been used to bolster the implication that she is loose. But there are other possibilities for her multiple husbands, most particularly Levirate marriage, in which a brother is obliged to marry his deceased brother's wife. THAT was a kind of safety net for a widow who had no grown children to take care of her. But the tradition, because of misogyny, patriarchy, sexism, or just plain intellectual laziness, has preferred to interpret her as a fallen woman. But it is perfectly imaginable that, after losing five husbands in a row (a whole family of brothers), with no children, that she is now arranging a new future with a new husband. And it is perfectly imaginable that this long string of terrible tragedies has stuck in the minds of her neighbors as this: **SHE IS CURSED**. She is bad luck. Stay away from her, or tragedy may come to YOUR family too. Do NOT talk to her, and do NOT go the well with her because she might poison YOUR bucket of water. (Maybe that's how she got rid of her husbands!) Today's gossip is no less cruel to people.

But Jesus DOES talk with her, and it takes place at this well so full of meaning. You see in the Hebrew Scriptures wells are often associated with weddings. Isaac's bride is identified for him at a well. Jacob meets Rachel, his future wife, at this well. Moses meets Zipporah, his future wife, at a well. Water, and wells were social places in that ancient society, places where people could find a lot more than water! Not only would life be sustained by the water found there, but life would be continued by the people who caught each other's eye there! Life and NEW LIFE found a place at the village well. THIS woman continually sought fulfillment in external relationships, but she is about to find a love inside herself that will never leave her bereft again!

What is so touching about this conversation, is that Jesus puts his finger exactly on her tragic experience, a lifetime of heartache, tears, and disappointments. When the Samaritan woman says, ‘he told me everything I have ever done,’ she wasn’t talking about her SINS. He was talking about her burdens! If she had been a very great sinner, he would have forgiven her, as he did in those situations. If she had been cursed or possessed, he would have exercised her demons, as he did in those situations. But no. He comforts her. He names and carries some of her water, the burdens she labors under. She no longer has to go to the well alone. She no longer has to go to ANYWHERE to reach that well: it will be inside of her.

The key to the story is the teaching that God cannot be contained in the buckets we make, in the politics we live by, or in the religions we fashion. With this woman’s spiritual healing, her joy overcomes whatever alienation there was between her and her neighbors. She becomes an Apostle to the Samaritans. She converts the whole town, which then becomes the center for Samaritan followers of Jesus. Because of HER, and IN HIS OWN LIFETIME, Jesus got to see his community and teaching expand beyond his country, his people and even his own religion! It is these Samaritans, and ONLY these Samaritans, who first proclaim Jesus as the *Savior of the World*. Ever since then, Orthodox Christians have revered her as St. Photini, the *Light-bearer*. Her feast day was just a few weeks ago on February 26th.

It doesn’t matter whether we worship at this mountain or that, at THIS church or that. Because God is only found at the WELL where you - *your past, and God’s love* - meet. God’s love and our healing are greater than, deeper than, and wider than our tribal, self-righteous, or political ideas. And the place where you will find that healing is the well of God’s love deep inside your own heart. Jesus is waiting there for you to draw some water, and help you carry it! (B Barnhart, *The Good Wine*, pp.201-211)

References

Bruno Barnhart, *The Good Wine*, pp. 201-211.
 NT Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays*, pp. 44-45.