

Thirsty for God's Grace
A Sermon on John 4:5-42 by the Rev. Philip Major
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One of the features of the Gospel of John is that an unusual collection of people proclaims Jesus as the Messiah. The people proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah include a diverse group of men, including a blind man named Bartimaeus, a ragged, wandering prophet who ate locusts and wild honey by the name of John, and Thomas, the disciple who always had more questions.

In the Gospel of John, the group of women proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah is even larger and more diverse. These women are independent; they speak for themselves. We do not see them deferring to the men in their families. In the Gospel of John, the first ones to recognize Jesus as the Messiah include the first person to come face to face with the risen Christ, a woman by the name of Mary Magdalene, two strong, intelligent sisters named Martha and Mary, and a foreign woman, the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well at the edge of the city of Sychar.

We are told that this woman had been married five times, and is currently living with a man who is not her husband. You and I don't know all the reasons and the events that have happened in her life, but Jesus does not judge the Samaritan woman harshly, and neither should we. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the Samaritan woman is venerated as a saint. Since her name is not given in the story, in the Orthodox Church she is called Photini, which means 'enlightened one'. By the end of our Gospel passage, the Samaritan woman has led a large crowd of people to become disciples of Jesus, the Messiah.

As the story begins Jesus and his disciples were travelling north, from Judah up to Galilee, which led them through the land of the Samaritans. The Samaritans were distant relatives of the Jews. They read many of the same scriptures as the Jews, but they had married people who came down from the north about 700 years before the time of Christ. Samaria was the region of the mixed-race people, and many people in Jesus' time and place considered them to be foreigners and unclean.

Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." If you are well acquainted with the first five books of the Bible, alarm bells might be going off in your head. Jesus and the Samaritan woman have walked into a situation well known from the Hebrew scriptures. Moses met his future wife, Zipporah, at a well. Rachel gave Jacob water to drink from a well when they first met, though it was a different well than the well in this story. In a land and in a time when water was the most precious resource, wells were the places where people from different tribes and different cultures encountered one another.

Our minds and hearts are on high alert for what will happen next, especially after we learn that Jesus' *disciples had gone to the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"* John helpfully reminds us that *Jews did not use eating and cooking equipment that had been used by Samaritans.*

The Samaritan woman is aware she doesn't know all of the answers to the questions in her life. She listens, and keeps asking more questions. *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." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"*

The Samaritan woman does not understand what Jesus is offering, but she is also not giving up. Her questions have become deeper and wiser.

Jesus continues his explanation: *“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 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 of water gushing up to eternal life.”* 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.”*

We are just one third of the way through this conversation, one of the longest between Jesus and anyone in the Gospels. But these opening verses give us what we really need. What we really need is a good example of what to do when life does not go according to our plans.

When we read that the Samaritan woman had been married five times, our minds often rush to judgment about bad things she might have done. I'm thinking some sad things have happened in her life. We might guess that the Samaritan woman was a widow, and that she had been in a marriage that wasn't so good, and that she experienced the loss of her partner over and over. If we approach her from a perspective of love and not judgement, we might see what Jesus sees in her, which is that she is courageous and strong. The sadness and brokenness are the unspoken part of the story, but they are not the whole story.

In a similar way, there is a grievous, unspoken part of the story for many of us, but that is not the whole story. There are at least a few parts of our lives that have not proceeded according to what we expected or hoped. Her life was not easy or painless, and your life has not been easy and painless.

We cannot hide our grief and sadness forever. God sees the grief and sadness inside us. God sees the goodness and the strength inside us too, even when we don't feel good and strong.

So the story of the Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus at the well of Jacob is one of our favorite stories. We want our encounters with Jesus to be like her encounter with Jesus.

You and I do not approach the one who gives us eternal life from a position of power or privilege. You and I approach the one we call the Lord of love from a position of humility. Like her, we are thirsty for something God is offering us. Like the Samaritan woman, we sometimes say harsh words or ask questions out of bitterness or fear. Sometimes we find ourselves arguing with the one who offers us the gift of forgiveness and love.

The Samaritan woman is our example of what it means to be faithful. She noticed something important was happening, even as she was doing the most common, everyday chore. She did not let shame or anger or fear keep her from her encounter with Jesus. She did not understand what Jesus was saying, so she asked more questions. She was persistent and curious.

The Samaritan woman did the right thing, even though she did not understand what was happening, or what was being offered to her. She said, *“Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”* She is having a face to face conversation with the Lord of love, but she doesn't understand what he is offering her. Her lack of understanding is not the important part.

There are two important parts of the story. The first is that the Samaritan woman recognizes there is an empty place, or perhaps a broken place, inside of her. The second is that God is offering her, and God is offering us, a gift that is beyond our understanding. We call God's gift grace or love or forgiveness. But like the Samaritan woman at the well, we don't really have the words, or even the understanding to describe the gift God is offering to us.

Sometimes we think we have to have the right words to describe everything in order to move forward in our relationships with God or with each other. The Samaritan woman clearly did not understand what was being offered to her. You and I do not understand what God is offering to us. We just know there is some emptiness inside us. We are thirsty for what God offers us.

This is what is revealed in the Gospel of John. The people who feel powerful, the people who feel entitled to be treated with respect, are often not the people who come to know the truth about God's love for us. The people who receive the gift of God's healing love are people whose lives have not gone according to their plans. They are people who wander the streets, dressed in rough, ragged clothes. They are foreigners. They are disabled. They are people who cannot provide for themselves but rely on the generosity of others. They are people who always have more questions.

So this is the way you and I approach the one who offers us the greatest gift. We do not understand, so we keep asking questions. We try to move closer to God, to have our questions come closer to God's answers.

We come to the well, to encounter God, because life has not proceeded according to our plans. We move closer to God because there is a part of us that is empty or broken, a part of us we cannot fix. We come because we are thirsty.