

WPC  
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## Living Water John 4:5-42

Jesus' longest recorded conversation with anyone is the one he has with the Samaritan woman here in John 4. In the previous chapter which we looked at last week, Jesus spoke with Nicodemus, a male member of the Jewish religious establishment, who came to talk with him at night. In today's passage, he speaks with a female member of an enemy people in broad daylight.<sup>1</sup> In the previous chapter, Jesus takes Nicodemus the Pharisee seriously and engages in theological dialogue. Amazingly, Jesus treats this Samaritan woman with the same respect.

This incident is remarkable for its simplicity: Jesus doesn't heal her of any disease; he doesn't raise her child from the dead; he doesn't turn water into wine. He simply talks with her, but the words he speaks are so radically different from the words she's heard her whole life, so filled with grace and truth, that her life is transformed, and she will never be the same again.

Jesus uses words to heal, forgive, and restore this woman at the well. The woman is surprised that Jesus talks with her at all, first because he was a man and she a woman, and second because Jews and Samaritans were bitter

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<sup>1</sup> Women's Bible Commentary

enemies, even though they were both descended from Abraham. One source of the enmity between them was a dispute about the correct place of worship. The Samaritans worshipped at a shrine on Mt. Gerizim, a shrine that competed with the Temple in Jerusalem.

Another source of enmity arises from the time when Jews returned from exile in 537 BC to find those who had remained in Judea during the exile, the Samaritans. These Samaritans were regarded as those who had mingled with foreigners. “Though the Samaritans believed that they worshipped the same God, and although they recognized the same scripture as the Jews, the Jews felt that the Samaritans were hopelessly corrupted during the period of exile.”<sup>2</sup> So as Eugene Peterson says, “Jews in those days wouldn’t be caught dead talking to Samaritans.” (The Message)

So there was a triple high barricade of gender, race, and religion that Jesus had to overcome in order to say anything to the Samaritan woman. And what he says to her is not just anything – what he asks her is astonishingly intimate: Jesus wants her to take her own clay water jar, fill it with water, and then hand it to him who will then bring it up to his lips and drink it. That shocks even John the Gospel writer, who quickly makes the comment: “Jews do not share things with Samaritans.”

What I’d like for us to ponder is this: is Jesus asking a trick question? Many commentators think he’s not really interested in the water in the well. What he’s really

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<sup>2</sup> William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Jan-March 2011, p. 54.

interested in is talking to her about living water. Later in John's Gospel Jesus says, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38). Maybe that's what Jesus really wants to talk about, and his question is a trick question to change the subject.

Lending credence to this idea is the fact that John structures this conversation according to a pattern he uses a number of times in his gospel that Tom Long calls Question/Answer/Dumb Response. It involves somebody asking Jesus a question at the routine, everyday level of life. Jesus answers the question, but he does not answer it at the same level. He answers it at the level of the *eternal Logos* – causing the answer to whistle right over the head of the person who has asked the question, at which point the person who asked the question says something banal, like in this story of the Samaritan woman at the well.

Question: "Why is it that you, a Jew, ask for water from a Samaritan woman?"

Answer: "If you knew the gift of God, you could have asked, and he would have given living water."

Whoosh - "Where are you going to get this water? You haven't even got a bucket."

As commentators are quick to point out, this is Johannine irony. It's not Jesus who is thirsty, it's the woman. It's not the water in the well that is of interest, it's the living water that springs from Jesus, and this is a quick question designed to change the subject.

But not so fast, says Long. Yes, John’s gospel is interested in living water,” but that living water sloshes underground throughout the whole gospel, springing up here and there in surprising places, like old wells and bathing pools, and then Jesus uses this water that comes up out of everyday sources as the way he becomes the living water that infuses the earth.”<sup>3</sup>

John is not interested in spiritually lifting us up out of the mundane, everyday, routine parts of life – in fact, that’s what the gospel of John is against. It’s the ancient Greek world that was interested in lifting us up out of the material world, of getting us out of the flesh and into the eternal, spiritual logos, but John from the very beginning insists it works the other way: in the beginning was the eternal logos, the eternal logos was with God, the eternal logos was God, and then, the logos became *flesh* and dwelt among us, and appears as a thirsty 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew beside our everyday wells asking for a drink of water that he really needs.

This is no trick question. This is Jesus standing beside the wells of our everyday life.

Long shares a story about a time he was visiting a friend in Lubbock, Texas, and he witnessed a car in a neighborhood turning into its driveway. Before the driver could get out of the car, a man came out of the front door and almost ran down to the car. He opened up the door of the car and embraced the woman behind the wheel and lifted her in his embrace out of the car. And Long said to his friend, “Now there’s a marriage that hasn’t lost its passion.”

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Long, Festival of Homiletics, May 2008.

He was looking at a love story, but one deeper than he knew, because when they got closer he could see what was happening. When he lifted her out of the car, he gently let her rest against the car, and then in a motion that he had practiced many times he opened the back door and took out the wheelchair, and opened it up, and lifted her into it. Day after day after day he carries his water jar to this well, and there are millions like him. People who visit their parents who have Alzheimer's in the nursing home; parents who are raising kids with Down's Syndrome and autism. All of us who live out our ordinary, everyday lives doing the best we can. And the good news of the gospel is that standing beside those everyday wells is Jesus our Lord saying to us, "Give me a drink of water that I may gush forth with streams of living water."

This is what the Samaritan woman senses. When Jesus makes the offer, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but those who drink of the water I give will never be thirsty," the woman responds with the word that gave her new life: "Give me this water that I may never be thirsty," she pleads.

"All right," said Jesus, "Go call your husband."

"I have no husband."

"That's right. You have no husband. You've had five husbands, and the one you're with now is not your husband. You told the truth when you said you have no husband."

At this moment in the conversation, says Fred Craddock, “The woman is defensive, and I can understand it. I can appreciate her defensiveness because she has had five husbands and she is living with a man now to whom she is not married. She has had it up to here with men.”<sup>4</sup>

It’s been interesting to read about the life of Elizabeth Taylor this week after her death. All the articles I read refer to her as being divorced seven times. Many commentators have raised their eyebrows about the Samaritan woman when she says she’s had five husbands, as if she were the “Liz Taylor of ancient Samaria, trading in husbands like sports cars.”<sup>5</sup> But we aren’t told why she had so many husbands. What are the particulars? Death? Divorce? Or is it promiscuity? We don’t know.

One thing we do know, however: those who blame this woman for being loose and divorcing her husbands at will miss the point - women in the first century didn’t have that kind of power. Craddock notes, “She didn’t choose to take five husbands and another man. She was chosen; she has been passed around like a piece of meat.”

And it’s to this woman that Jesus offers living water. And then she shares the word with the people around her. Wonderful transformations are possible when we share living water with those around us. We are the ones

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<sup>4</sup> Fred Craddock, p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, p. 35.

who bring with us, by the grace of God, the presence of Christ to those around us. The Word became flesh and lives among us. The Samaritan woman experienced what it's like to meet Jesus. It can still happen today. We too can meet Jesus, the living Word, become transformed by him, and leave this place with a word to live and a word to speak.

I've shared this story before, but it's one of my favorites, so I'm going to share it again. It's a story of a woman named Kathleen. When she was a little girl, she dreamed of becoming a missionary. She was going to go to exotic places and share the gospel and spread the good news all around the world. It didn't work out that way.

She got married, had children, and when the family needed extra income, she went to nursing school and ended up as a public health nurse in Asbury Park, NJ. She was not in Kenya, she was not in China, she was in Asbury Park, NJ. If you know Asbury Park, you know that in the 30's and 40's it was a fashionable seaside resort – great hotels, shops, and a boardwalk that rivaled Atlantic City. But by the time Kathleen was there as a public health nurse, Asbury Park looked like bombed-out Berlin: the shops were closed, the boardwalk had deteriorated, the hotels had either closed or become flophouses.

There was one hotel that had in it scores of aged people – all of them old, most of them sick, all of them poor. The management of the hotel would not let in public health nurses because they did not want them to see the squalid conditions in which those people were living on their social security checks, and the corrupt city government of Asbury Park backed them up. But every time Kathleen passed by that hotel and looked up, she saw Jesus in a window saying, “I am thirsty.”

So she took off her nurse’s uniform and put on ordinary clothes and went down to the hotel incognito and hired herself on as a chambermaid. And every day she went from room to room to room, changing linens, scrubbing toilets, taking blood pressures, checking medications, and speaking a word of encouragement. When no one else saw anything but despair and sorrow, she saw Jesus saying, “Would you give me a drink?”

And through dipping her clay water jar every day into the well and holding it out to his lips, the world in Asbury Park was filled with streams of mercy.

And as John says, when Jesus was on the cross, with his next to last breath, he looked out at the whole world and said, “I’m thirsty.” And some kind people at the foot of the cross poured some wine on some hyssop and held it up to his mouth, and when he had drunk of it, he said, “It is finished.”

And a soldier pierced his side with a spear – and streams of water, living water, gushed out, to the whole world. Thanks be to God.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Long, Festival of Homiletics, May 2008.