

John 4:5-42 (NRSV)

⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ 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."

¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ 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."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵ The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." ²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" ²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" ³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." ³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." ³³ So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" ³⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵ Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have

heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

What a Day

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Text: *John 4:5-42*

We used to see her. We averted our eyes, but we saw her alright. She didn't want us to, to see her. And we would have said we didn't want to see her either. But there was a certain satisfaction in catching a glance of her. I think it gave us a certain security to have her to wag our heads at.

So, we'd see her, even if we pretended not to. With our side-glances we would see her go to the well in the middle of the day. I'm sure she despised our pretense of ignoring her, which always ended with that almost imperceptible shake of our heads meant to convey our disapproval. So she went to the well in the middle of the day, when it was too hot to be there. Even if she walked the gauntlet of our reproach, at least there were no others there at the well itself. At least there, in the heat of the day, she could draw the water and no one would look the other way when she came, or cast knowing glances to each other. At least she spared herself that.

Of course, it was her own fault. It's hard to know why it all ended up this way, but that it was her fault was clear enough to us. She married Benjamin when she was a young woman. Everyone thought they would be a wonderful family. But almost imperceptibly things grew distant and then sour. No children came, and people began to whisper about that. Benjamin grew nasty, and people wondered what she was doing to make him miserable. Finally, no one was surprised when Benjamin wrote out a divorce. Everyone was happy when Benjamin found another wife. Poor man, though, that one didn't work out either, but that's another story.

The woman was on her own. She built a ramshackle shack. She would try to glean in the fields behind the harvest. She tried to sell cloth, but not many would buy from her.

Another man, Peter, not the Peter in the Bible, just Peter, finally came to her rescue and married her. Peter had a small business. He wasn't very good at it, but you had to give him credit. He was willing to marry this divorced woman, even though he must have known that she was a bad egg.

And sure enough. The marriage didn't last. Finally he had to strike her just to get her to behave. And then came another divorce decree. Well, to make a long story short, this woman went from man to man for quite awhile. All told, she managed to get five of them, five, to marry her. But finally she stooped to the lowest rung on the ladder. She's just living with a man who didn't even have to bother to marry her. He lays around drinking wine most of the time. You can hear him yelling at her morning, noon and night. So, we'd see her, pretending we didn't and wagging our heads in self-satisfaction, as she slowly walked, bent over on the way to the well in the middle of the day.

Every once in awhile we'd have someone from Judea or Galilee come through Sychar on their way to the other. We were caught in the middle, quite literally. The Galileans to the North and the Judeans to the South thought they were better than us. It was a long bitter family feud.

It went back centuries. Once we were all one nation, more or less. Then, a long time ago Assyria invaded us. According to the story, Assyria deported the cream of the crop. Assyria put all the rabble in Samaria. And then they even shipped in some more riffraff from some other places they invaded. People intermarried, and everything just mixed together. Then when the cream of the crop came back, finally, they looked down their noses at us. We were impure. We worshiped in the wrong place. On and on it went.

So, now, every once in awhile some one comes through on their way from Judea to Galilee, or the other way around, and I have to tell you, we hate it. They don't look at us directly. They don't talk to us. They just come through when they need to travel the most direct route between the two. When they run into us, they turn away, and you can almost see them sneering.

Anyway, on this particular day, this guy comes through at the middle of the day, he went to the well. I guess he figured no one else would be there. But sometimes God has a sense of humor. Here's this Galilean guy, trying to avoid us contaminated Samaritans. He goes to the well when no one else will be there. And who does he run into? That's right. He runs into a Samaritan. He runs into the lowest person in the whole town. Pretty funny, don't you think? He wants to avoid being contaminated by the Samaritans, and he runs into the scum of our community. And the woman, she's trying to avoid getting sneered at by people in town, and she runs into someone who will sneer at her more than anybody would.

Well, that's how it all unfolded that day, I recall. But then things got very odd, very odd indeed.

She came back into the village on a dead run. Imagine that, if you can. She left to go to the well bent over and weary, beaten down, but here she came as if she were a young woman again. And instead of avoiding us, she couldn't wait to speak to us. She was out of breath, but the words kept coming between gasps for air: "Come and see! Come and see! A man who told me everything I have ever done! Come and see! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

I recall that moment as though it happened just yesterday. I was utterly confused, on the one hand. The old woman, full of shame, was running like a child. The old woman who avoided us and whom we sneered at was calling out for us to come with her. The old woman, full of shame, whom we thought deserved all the bad things that had befallen her was shouting out with joy that a man told her everything that she had ever done and had ever happened to her. It was as if the man had exposed every horrible part of her life, and she was jumping for joy. On this hand, it was as if the whole world I knew had collapsed. Nothing added up. Nothing made sense. All the order we had constructed was pulled out from under me. For God's sake, God didn't even make sense anymore.

On the other hand, on the other hand, it was as if the whole universe had begun to move in slow motion. Colors were as sharp and vivid as on a cool autumn day. Everything made sense. I couldn't have told you then, and maybe I can't even now, what I meant by that. At just the moment that nothing made sense, nothing added up, at that very same moment, it was as if everything stood in visible relief.

And so we followed her. We followed the woman at whom, less than an hour ago, we would not even look. We followed her to the well. Just as she said, a Galilean was there. By then some of his friends had come along, too. I could feel the instinctive tightening in my gut that told me this was a very bade idea. Had I run up the hill just to once again be mocked by

some arrogant Galileans passing through? But she kept on saying, “Come on. Come on.”

When we got there she pointed at the man and told us all what had happened: I came up here to get water at the well, like I usually do. You all know what I mean. When I came up over the brow of the hill and I could see the well, this man was here. I started to turn away and go home. I didn’t need another man in my life, especially some arrogant Galilean. But the man called after me, “Wait. Come here. Give me a drink.” I had no idea what he was up to, but I can tell you I didn’t trust him one bit. I looked him right in the eye and said, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”

You know what he said? He said, “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.”

I was afraid. He was talking in riddles. And then I noticed he didn’t even have a bucket. I figured the best thing I could do was to play along until I could think how to get out of there. I said, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you plan to get that living water?”

At that the woman turned to Jesus, and she said to him, “Tell them what you told me. Go ahead.”

He pointed to the well and said, “I told her, everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,¹⁴ 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.”

“That’s what he said alright. That’s what he said. And all of a sudden I wasn’t afraid anymore. I just blurted out, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

And then he told me, ““Go, call your husband, and come back.

Suddenly, the euphoria was gone. What was I thinking? That I would actually get living water? I told him the truth, or at least as much of it as I wanted him to know. “I have no husband,” I said. And he said to me, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!”

I said to him, “So, what are you, some kind of prophet or something?”

And then he went on to tell me all about my life. Everything. He knew everything. And after that, he said, “Do not seek the water that will leave you thirsty. Today, I offer you living water.”

I asked him, “How can that be? You know my life. It is a mess. Everyone sneers at me. I am ostracized. Anyone who is upright looks down on me.”

He just repeated, “I offer you living water. What you are talking about is the thirst the old water has left you with.” He went on, “You are loved and accepted. God loves and accepts you. And God wants you to drink deeply of the water that will leave no thirst. For this I have come, to offer you living water.”

I was still unsure. What could this mean? How did this living water work? What would I have to do? So, I said, “This living water, what must I do to receive it?”

And he said, “You must reach out your hand and take it. That’s all.”

I don’t think I can explain how or why, but suddenly something inside me changed. A weight lifted. And that’s when I ran down to get everyone to come and see.

The woman looked at us and said, “Do you see what I see?”

That was the woman’s story. The truth was, we did. We did see. Speaking for myself,

the first thing I noticed wasn't that pleasant. I felt ashamed. I don't know how it came so clear like that, but it did. I knew that standing there I was a part of the bitter water the woman had been drinking in our village for all those years. The wagging tongues, the nodding heads, the sideways looks – they were me. I was worse than offering water that doesn't quench the thirst. I had told her that the water I had would quench her thirst, and then I told her that she couldn't have any of it because she wasn't worthy to drink my water.

I had been a real part of this woman's suffering. And who was I, anyway? Standing there in the heat of the day by the well, standing there in the face of a man who had just told the woman everything she had ever done, everything I had ever done and been paraded before my eyes. Oh, I had treated her badly. But so many others, too. My own wife. She was bent under my bitter water. I didn't take her seriously. I sneered at her, maybe not like I did at the woman, but I did. And I made the decisions. And I demanded my way. And I scoffed when she wanted something different. And she kept trying to please me. But it made her bent and weary.

I thought in that moment also about what a waste my life had been. Chasing after honor, water that doesn't quench the thirst. I wanted to think of myself as better than my neighbor, better than my wife, and certainly better than the woman. Of course, it was a double-edged thing. Every time a Galilean or a Judean came through town, I was left thirsting for honor. I could be the greatest citizen in Sychar, and when a Galilean or Judean came to town, I was nothing, just dirt to kick out of the way. This was another kind of shame I felt.

But that odd day the shame lost its hold. It didn't leave a parched thirst in me. Somehow, in all its sorrow and pain, it was cooled by living water flowing over me. Imagine, the heat of the day in the desert, standing in the open sun, cool living water was running over me, washing my very soul.

I looked around me, and I was not alone. In fact everyone was transfixed on the woman's story and the man who was sitting by the well. After a bit, we insisted that he stay with us. And he did, for a couple of days.

He told us more about the living water. He also told us about bread that does not leave you hungry. And then he left. But ever since there has been running in my mind that I am loved by the one who knows everything I have ever done. It is like cool water on a hot day. And I do not thirst after the old water anymore. Neither do my townspeople. And neither does the woman. No more do we thirst after water that does not quench. For we are bathed in the healing water of life. Amen.