

Scripture Reading for Sunday March 15 2020

John 4:5-26,28-30,39-42 (NIV)

So he [Jesus] came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. ⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?" ¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." ¹⁶ He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." ¹⁷ "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸ The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true." ¹⁹ "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ "Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." ²⁵ The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." ²⁶ Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he."

²⁸ Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ²⁹ "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" ³⁰ They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

³⁹ Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. ⁴¹ And because of his words many more became believers. ⁴² They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

Sermon: “Jesus, Giver of Living Water and Saviour of the World”

There are many loved parables of Jesus, such as the “prodigal” son¹ or the good Samaritan² in Luke. And there are many loved narratives of encounters with Jesus, such as the conversation with Martha at the raising of Lazarus,³ or of Jesus talking with Nicodemus - which we heard about last week.⁴ But up there high on the list of favorites must surely be this story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well.⁵ The story is in stark contrast to that of Nicodemus. He was an important religious leader who came to see Jesus “by night” in Jerusalem.⁶ This unnamed Samaritan woman meets Jesus in the heat of the day, at high noon, at the well outside of a Samaritan town.⁷ Remember, in John 3:16 we read, “For God so loved *the world* that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever* believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”⁸ What does that mean *in practice*? John spells it out in this amazing encounter.

Jesus travels north from Jerusalem to Galilee and instead of taking the usual route that *avoids* the region of Samaria, he travels *through* it.⁹ He is tired, hot, hungry, and thirsty.¹⁰ And so he sits on the stone lid of Jacob’s ancient well¹¹ while his disciples enter the town in search of food. To help understand the significance of the story, it is necessary to know that Jews and Samaritans had *despised* each other for many *hundreds* of years.¹² Things took a major turn for the worse when a key Samaritan shrine on nearby Mount Gerizim [*Geh-ri-zim*] was destroyed by Jews in 128 BC.¹³ Understandably, Jews and Samaritans did *not* socialize or dine together, and obviously did *not* share drinking vessels. Yet when a lone Samaritan woman came to the well, Jesus *initiated* the conversation and asked for water to drink.¹⁴ This simple request is *hugely* shocking; it breaks a well-established taboo for a man to speak to a woman in public.¹⁵ Moreover, for a *Rabbi* to enter into such a conversation was subject to divine judgement!¹⁶

¹ Luke 15:11-32.

² Luke 10:25-37.

³ John 11:1-44.

⁴ John 3:1-17; see: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/A-Confusing-Conversation-with-Nicodemus.pdf>.

⁵ John 4:1-42. (The conversation with Jesus’ disciples is omitted for reasons of brevity in this sermon.) See also the important parallels in Gen 24:10–61; 29:1–20; Exod 2: 15–21; 1 Kings 17:10–11. (John’s *readers* would recognize such links.)

⁶ John 3:1-2a.

⁷ John 4:5-6. Unlike Nicodemus, she had seen *nothing* of the miracles Jesus did or heard that he was “a teacher who has come from God” (John 3:2). (This meeting a Samaritan woman is in contrast to everything that preceded in John’s gospel!)

⁸ John 3:16. See also John 1:9-13 on the *inclusivity* of Christ’s mission.

⁹ Jews normally crossed the River Jordan into the regions of Perea and the Decapolis to avoid Samaria! [In John 4:4 it says “Jesus *had* to pass through Samaria.” Clearly this is not true, but there was, in effect, a *divine imperative* (i.e., ‘led by the Spirit’) to demonstrate the inclusivity of John 3:16.]

¹⁰ John 4:6,8. (For brevity, I omit that his disciples are with him.) John presents a very *human* Jesus here, having earlier stressed his essential ‘divinity’ (or Messiahship) – John 1:1-18.

¹¹ Jacob’s Well still exists (and it’s more than 100 feet deep). The (raised) stone ‘lid’ has a hole in the center of it to allow access for water and to protect children.

¹² See 2 Kings 17 and the Assyrian exile of the Northern Kingdom in 721 BC. (The remaining ‘Samaritans’ had intermarried.)

¹³ See also John 4:20.

¹⁴ John 4:7.

¹⁵ The disciples are startled by this! (John 4:27). [Even a married man would not speak to his wife in public, let alone speak to another woman!]

¹⁶ i.e., the fires of “Gehenna” (or “hell”). The rabbi risked impurity, gossip, and ultimately been drawn into immorality!

Furthermore, we can't overlook the fact that this woman came *alone* to the well *at midday*. Women from the town would normally come in the cool of the morning or evening to draw water *as a group*. There is therefore a hint that she is socially excluded from local society; maybe she was poor or was deemed immoral. Jesus, by initiating this conversation with her not only elevates her worth, but overturns racial and gender biases. The woman is *shocked* that he speaks to her, and says as much.¹⁷

Jesus responds cryptically, "If you knew . . . *who* it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked *him* and he would have given you *living* water."¹⁸ Note first that John hints that through this conversation the *identity* of Jesus will be revealed and, second, this revelation will hinge around the expression "living water," which has a double meaning.¹⁹ Physically, "living" water meant *running* water from a natural spring, as opposed to stagnant water in a well [or a cistern]. Alternatively, the expression can mean *life-giving* water. As in the story of Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman only hears the literal meaning of 'running water.' How can this man who wants *her* to give *him* water from Jacob's Well able to offer *her* fresh spring water? He can't be greater than the patriarch Jacob, can he?²⁰ The irony is that Jesus is indeed *greater* than Jacob, but the woman can't recognize that yet and naturally assumes the opposite.

Jesus responds to the woman's challenge by focusing on the effects of the two different waters. The abundant waters in Jacob's Well were legendary, but could not satisfy thirst permanently. Jesus' description of his gift of water clarifies the meaning of the expression 'living water.' Jesus offers water that will give *life*, saying: "The water that I will give you will become in you a *fountain* of water *springing* up to *eternal life*."²¹ Naturally, the Samaritan woman responds enthusiastically – we all would! She says, "Sir, give me this water,"²² assuming that she will no longer have to come back to the well. This reveals that she has not grasped the radical nature of the gift Jesus offers. His living water is nothing less than the *Holy Spirit* of God, a *gift* from God that will be forever renewed in the heart of the believer. Living water," then, means *new life*, regardless of gender, geography, racial, or moral background.

Pause for a moment and hear again the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost."²³ "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation."²⁴ "For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring,

¹⁷ John 4:9.

¹⁸ John 4:10.

¹⁹ Compare this *double* meaning (physical and spiritual) with being born "from above" and "anew/again" in John 3:3,5-8.

²⁰ John 4:11-12. (Perhaps thinking he is a miracle worker.) This is an example of John's literary use of *irony*.

²¹ John 4:14b. Note: 14a "Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst" – literally "will never be thirsty forever." John *readers* recognize (from John 3) that more is at stake here. He will later explain what is implied, see John 7:37–39. This "living water" also needs to be seen in the light of: Ps 42:1; Jer 2:13; Ezek 47:1-12; Zech 13:1, 14:8; Rev 7:17.

²² John 4:15. Samaritan woman does not yet recognize the true identity Jesus.

²³ Isa 55:1; these words are echoed in Rev 21:6.

²⁴ Isa 12:3.

and my blessing on your descendants.”²⁵ John’s *readers* would make this connection with this story, and so must we if we are to understand such prophecies being fulfilled in Jesus.

Jesus then responds with a different question that opens up the conversation so that *she* may discover *his* true identity. “Go call your husband and come back here,” says Jesus.²⁶ She replies with a half-truth, “I have no husband.”²⁷ Jesus reveals that he *knows* the *full* truth about her present and past marital situation. This is *not* said to condemn her. Note her reaction: “Sir, I see that you are a *prophet*.”²⁸ She clearly doesn’t feel judged or put down²⁹ by Jesus because she then goes on to ask a pressing question that Samaritans had, hoping that this insightful prophet could provide an authoritative answer. “Where should we worship God? Here on this mountain that is sacred to Samaritans or in the Temple in Jerusalem, as you Jews claim?”³⁰ The answer to this question is *hugely* significant! Jesus says, “Believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father *neither* on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. Indeed, the time has now come when the *true* worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.”³¹ Jesus is stating that the traditional barriers between Jews and Samaritans will soon be *meaningless* and both can equally and authentically worship God *in the Spirit* regardless of geographical location. Implicit in the text is that this “coming time” or new era has arrived in the person of Jesus himself.

The woman responds, “I know that the Messiah is coming and whenever he comes, he will tell us everything.”³² And Jesus replies, “I am he.”³³ The words in Greek are simply: “I AM,” which signifies she is witnessing the *very* presence of God - just as God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush.³⁴ Through this conversation the woman comes to realize *for herself* that this Jewish stranger is not just a prophet but possibly the expected Messiah himself! She leaves her valuable water jar and goes back to the town, saying: “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. He can’t be the Messiah, can he?”³⁵

What happened next? Many Samaritans in the town believed because of the woman’s witness. Moreover, the people got to ask Jesus their *own* questions and as result they also believed Jesus was the *Messiah*, the *Saviour of the whole World* – and not just the Jews. And, shockingly, Jesus stayed with them for two days, so breaking every social custom in the Jewish book and demonstrating the hated

²⁵ Isa 44:3. “Living water” is also linked to the “new heart” that the prophets foretold God will give to his people; see Ezek 11:19, 36:26; Jer 31:33; Heb 8:10.

²⁶ John 4:16.

²⁷ John 4:17.

²⁸ John 4:19. Jesus’ apparent ability to know all things is also evident in John 1:48–50; 2:24.

²⁹ Sin is unbelief here, not moral deficiency, the inability or unwillingness to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord and God; see John 3:18. The reasons for the woman’s marital history may be intriguing to us, but they do not concern Jesus.

³⁰ John 4:20.

³¹ John 4:21–24. See also John 5:25, 28. [Note: John’s *readers* know that the Temple was destroyed in AD 70.]

³² John 4:25. The Samaritans like the Jews expected a Messiah – and Samaritans called their Messiah “the One who returns.”

³³ John 4:26.

³⁴ See also John 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5,7 for absolute “I AM” statements. (See Exod 3:14).

³⁵ John 4:29 (NET/NRSV). This Greek wording is better translated in this translation than the NIV.

Samaritans were welcome members of God's family.³⁶ The new era Jesus mentioned earlier had indeed arrived.

This is indeed a beautiful story and one that occurs very early in John's Gospel. There are several key things for us to recognize today. Notice how Jesus challenges conventional expectations and the status quo. This story highlights both the distinct *racial* boundary between the Jews and Samaritans, and the *social* boundary between men and women. Such barriers have occurred throughout history, and continue to do so. It doesn't just have to be based on race or gender, but on social status, sexual identity, or some other factor. If we are to follow the example of Jesus, the Church is called to *cross such boundaries* instead of constructing or maintaining walls.³⁷ Remember, Samaritan woman is *never* judged as a sinner; on the contrary, she is portrayed as a *model* of growing faith. This is why this story is "good news" for *anyone* who has ever felt humiliated or stigmatized or rejected, because Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, will gently engage with you and take you seriously. Jesus also welcomes people who are just starting on the journey of faith, who are full of questions and doubts. Just as the woman in this encounter, there is safe and gracious space for us all to discover *for ourselves* the true identity of Jesus, so allowing us to slowly move from unbelief to belief, from darkness to light, blindness to sight. This is how the Spirit of God works; God doesn't *coerce* us into faith, for that would not be a free response to the gracious gift of his Son. This story also tells us that Jesus already knows everything about us – "all we have ever done" – and *loves us anyway*.

This therefore is a beautiful message of hope and grace for all who need to hear such a message today. It is also a shocking message for those are sure they know how God works in the world, for God's Spirit can bring new life in surprising places and among people who are unlike ourselves – perhaps those we even think are unworthy of God's love.³⁸ This story explains what it *means* when John earlier writes: "For God so loved *the world* that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever* believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world *to condemn the world*, but to *save the world* through him."³⁹ Amen. Let us pray.

³⁶ John 4:39-42. (See also John 15:4,7. To "stay" or "remain" or abide" are key thematic words in John's Gospel.)

³⁷ One can compare this encounter with the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:29–37.

³⁸ The contrast between the encounter with Nicodemus and this *unnamed* woman cannot be overlooked. Nicodemus (a *named* person) was a member of the Jewish religious elite in urban Jerusalem and likely wealthy. This woman was not only a *woman*, (culturally a 'nobody'), but a despised Samaritan from a rural town. Jesus engages with them both, people from very different walks of life. John implies Jesus engages with *all those in between* those two stereotypical extremes. Jesus is indeed the Saviour of the whole world.

³⁹ John 3:16-17.