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## **“Give Me Water”**

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*John 4:4-15 (CEB)*

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Jesus is thirsty. He is at Jacob’s well, but he has no bucket. His only option is a Samaritan woman. He is, after all, in Samaria – far from home in foreign territory. He has no choice but to rely on the kindness of a stranger. But this woman is more than just a stranger. Think of the people who are most poorly regarded, unwelcome, unaccepted. Who are the sort of people you really don’t like? People who display confederate flags, people who stand for all the things you hate, people who drip with wealth and unacknowledged privilege, Yankees or Steelers fans, whoever you are least likely to want to have to spend any length of time with. Then multiply any animosity you feel toward them tenfold, and you’re approaching the way Jewish people in Jesus’s time felt about Samaritans.

*Jesus had to go through Samaria*, the scripture tells us. That’s not entirely true, though. Jesus and the disciples had been in Jerusalem and the surrounding Judean territory, but decided it was time to go home to Galilee. The most direct route went through Samaria. But many other Jewish people avoided Samaria by going east across the Jordan, north, then back over the river. Others took the western route closer to the Mediterranean coastline. The eastern route would extend the trip by 2-3 days, the western by another day or two. But Jesus and the disciples chose to take the most direct route, which put them smack in the middle of Samaria. So here’s Jesus, deep in enemy territory, at the hottest part of the day with no food or water. Was this mere happenstance, a chance encounter with the woman at the well, or did Jesus deliberately plan to be in this place at this time, all by himself after dispatching the disciples to go into town and buy food?

Like so many encounters with Jesus in John’s gospel, this one begins with misunderstanding. The conversation between Jesus and the unnamed woman at first appears to be like people talking past each other, exchanging questions but missing the connection.

*I’m thirsty. Give me a drink.*

*Why are you talking to me?*

*If you knew who I was, you’d ask me to give you living water.*

*Pshhh. You don’t even have a bucket, dude.*

She doesn’t get him. He seems not to get her, either. But what appears to be a conversation going nowhere is actually moving progressively upward, like rungs of a ladder.

*I need a drink.*

*You’re a Jew and I’m a Samaritan, and a woman at that. We don’t help each other.*

*I’m not your enemy. And I can offer you something better than this water.*

*Do you have another source of water I don’t know about? Because this is the only well we have, and it’s been our water source since the time of Jacob.*

*Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again. But if you drink of the living water I offer, you will never be thirsty again.*

*Sir, give me this water!*

With each exchange, the Samaritan woman begins to realize this is no ordinary conversation, and Jesus is no ordinary conversation partner. But she still doesn't quite comprehend what he's saying. Jesus is offering her more than the water in the well, but she's focused on the literal. "I'd sure like to have some of this water you're describing." If she'll never be thirsty again, she won't have to keep coming to this well – walking every day, who knows how far, lugging an empty jar one way and a full (and heavy) jar the other. If there's some kind of water that will make it so she's never thirsty again, she wants it. Who wouldn't?

When we lived in Oberlin, the quality of the city water was somewhat questionable. Fortunately, there were a couple of natural springs nearby, with self-serve, coin-operated kiosks that offered water for a nominal cost (a quarter for a gallon, a dollar to fill a five-gallon jug). Many locals, the Call family included, regularly loaded empty plastic jugs in the trunk of our car and drove to a cinderblock building on Route 58 to supply our house with water for drinking and cooking. With five of us in the house, we went through 8-10 gallons a week on average. Now, that was a little inconvenient in the summer. But dragging those jugs around in the cold and snow of winter, inevitably slopping water onto my pantleg in the process, wasn't much fun at all. I would have gladly accepted an offer that relieved me of that responsibility.

We can hardly blame the woman at the well for mistaking Jesus's message for a way to make her life easier. But even as it becomes clearer that he's not offering what she *thought* he was offering, she stays in the conversation. In the verses that follow what we read this morning, they go back and forth several more times, their exchange growing deeper and becoming more revelatory. Inspired by what Jesus says, she abandons her water jar and rushes into the city to invite her neighbors to "Come and see," John's signal for an invitation to believe. We first encounter those words when Jesus calls his disciples to follow him, then when Philip invites Nathaniel to join them. It appears later when Jesus is about to raise Lazarus from the dead and open the eyes of those who saw only the hopelessness of grief. Here, when the woman at the well summons the people of the town to "Come and see a man who has told me everything I've ever done," many people come to faith because of her witness.

Jesus and the disciples ended up staying there two full days. It wasn't on their agenda. These were not their people. They certainly were not the people the disciples thought they should be hanging around. But if you haven't noticed, Jesus has a distinct fondness for crossing boundaries.

The woman at the well was an unlikely conversation partner. She was a Samaritan. She was a woman. We learn in subsequent verses that she has a questionable past and a dubious present. John never even bothers to tell us her name. *But Jesus sees her.*

Jesus meets the woman where she is, just as he does with everyone, including us. He doesn't speak in complicated theological terms or launch into a well-rehearsed evangelistic message to bring her to faith. As he so often does, Jesus uses simple things we all know – things like bread and light and sheep and seeds – and imbues them with deeper meaning. In Jesus's hands, even the simple things take on greater significance. Here he is, in the heat of the day, tired and thirsty, sitting next to Jacob's well when a woman approaches to draw water. So, he uses the occasion and the water they both need to create a connection. The water drawn from the well will quench their thirst in the moment, but it won't last. She'll have to come back to that well over and over to provide for herself and her household. But the *living water* Jesus offers will bring abundant life forever. He doesn't disregard the need for water. She still needs to draw water for the day and he's still thirsty. We aren't told, but we *hope* that she actually gave him a drink as they talked. He didn't dismiss the physical need for water. Water is essential for life. We drink water to replenish and restore ourselves, taking what's on the outside and bringing it into our bodies. But Jesus offers us something beyond physical existence: *living water* that comes from the inside out, like a spring that "bubbles up into eternal life."

With whom do you identify in this story? Most of the interpretive history of this passage assumes Jesus was demonstrating the boundary-crossing power of the gospel, teaching us to let go of our biases about who is and is not worthy. It's sometimes pointed out that because Jesus invested his time in this woman who had five husbands and was

living with a man she wasn't married to, we shouldn't be so quick to cast judgment. After all, her witness brought many others to faith in Jesus.

Both those things are true, and they're perfectly legitimate interpretations, important takeaways from this story. But other possibilities present themselves if we identify in this story not with Jesus or one of the disciples, but with the woman. Maybe it's because of my male bias, but I don't think I'd ever read it from her perspective until recently. How does this story speak to us differently if we read it from her perspective? What boundaries has Jesus crossed to get to us? Are we able to see beyond our immediate concerns to realize the gift that Jesus offers? What lengths have others gone to be in relationship with us, to share their faith with us, to help us to experience the living water of Christ? What does it say about Jesus that he trusts us to be his witnesses for the gospel? What else might he be asking of us? Jesus is thirsty, and you're the one with the bucket. How will your life change by answering the call?

Jesus offers us living water – grace and forgiveness, intimacy with God, a way of life that leads to wholeness for ourselves and others, in this life and for all eternity. We would, of course, like to have that kind of water. We're just so consumed with the life we have that we miss the opportunity for life greater. We're constantly striving to satisfy our hunger for immediate, impermanent, Amazon-orderable things. We are consumed with an obsessive need for constant information and always-on connection. We distract ourselves with the escapism of binge-watching the latest release from Netflix or Prime or the next game of whatever sport is in season now. The frenetic pace and constant state of high alert so consume our bandwidth that we can barely hear Jesus's offer, let alone receive it. *What's that you say, Jesus? Living water? Yeah, sounds good. Text me when you want to get together about that.*

It's pointless for me to say we need to live more simply. Some of us don't have that option. Life keeps coming, and it's only likely to become more complicated. For others, life is too quiet already, and there's a hunger for deeper relationship. During this season, whatever your life's pace, make at least a few moments to pause, breathe, be present in the time we have. Jesus is here. He sees you. Stay in the conversation. Listen to his voice. Receive what he's offering. Because when we drink in the living water, it can quench the things we are really thirsting for. Amen.