

Leave it at the well...  
Exodus 17:7; John 4:5-42  
March 27, 2011

*“<sup>28</sup>Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, <sup>29</sup>“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”<sup>30</sup>They left the city and were on their way to him.”* (Jn. 4)

Today’s **gospel reading is the longest recorded** dialogue between Jesus and anyone in the gospels, and it is with a Samaritan woman. Unlike last week’s gospel reading with Nicodemus, this exchange happens in the light of day and not the cloak of darkness. What is also of **interest here is the time of day, noon time. Women** typically drew water from the well in the cool of the day. This woman was intentional about avoiding the other women who would come to that **well, perhaps because she encountered** the cattiness and cruelty women sometimes exhibit toward one another, especially given that she has had five husbands and the man she is with now is not a husband. This woman gets Jesus’ message far quicker than Nicodemus, the religious leader, and she **goes to tell the very people who consider her an** outsider about the “Messiah.” She is the first evangelist. This is the first place in this gospel that Jesus says, “I am,” as in “I am the Messiah.”

In the midst of all the richness of this text, I would like to focus on the passage that I began with: *“<sup>28</sup>Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, <sup>29</sup>“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”<sup>30</sup>They left the city and were on their way to him.”* (Jn. 4) Again this was a Samaritan **woman. The Samaritans and the Jews did not share.** They did not like each other for a myriad of reasons, including the fact that the Samaritans were seen as impure Jews who had historically married outside their faith and worshipped idols. While Samaritans were considered beneath Jews, they were one step better than the Gentiles. So, Jesus begins today’s exchange by violating several socio-cultural norms. He speaks to a Samaritan, a **woman, a woman who is alone at the well.**

Who is this woman, really? If we look deeper at the heart of what is written and is implied in today’s reading, she represents most of us. This is a woman who

knows what it's like to be beaten down by life. For those of us who have lived long enough, we know what it is to be disappointed in ourselves, in our friends and family, and at times disappointed in God. She **has had five husbands and the man she is** currently with is not her husband. We do not know why she has had five husbands, the text does not explicitly say if they died or if some of them divorced her, but be that as it may this woman is now with a man that she does not love. She perhaps finds herself in the position of needing him to survive. **While this woman had been victimized in many ways**, she was a survivor of her circumstances.

At yesterday's Northwest Association Meeting, there was a panel of folks who have left the church for one reason or another. They were asked pointed questions as to why they no longer find a home in a church. One of the gentlemen who spoke was a former youth minister of a United Church of Christ. After much discussion he finally said, "I lost a granddaughter at one month of age a while back and I asked God why He (sic) would do this to our family. Then **this past year I almost lost another** granddaughter at one month old. It is enough to make you ask, 'if God is so loving then why would God take the life or threaten the life of such a gift?' He continued to say, 'but, I also know that it is because of the prayers of so many people that this granddaughter lived.' It just **makes your faith a little rocky and it's hard** to believe when things like that happen, ya' know." A man who once taught children what it is to walk in faith who now finds himself as a survivor of his circumstances, struggling to hold on to his faith.

Another one of the presenters on the panel was a young woman who ran away from home at the age of fifteen, got pregnant at 18, delivered her baby at 19 and had **to relinquish custody of him due to circumstances** that she did not share. She had been raised in the church but found the church to not welcome her when she entered its doors smelling, looking like a disheveled teenager, reflecting her then homeless state. She stated she believed the people at the churches she sought refuge in judged her for being an unwed pregnant teenager who was wearing every piece of clothing she owned at one time **because she was homeless. She went on to say that she**

wanted to find a church that would accept her. She wants a church that will not judge her past, but one that would help her to grow in faith and extended a true welcome.

Both of these people, although their circumstances differed, are survivors of what life has handed them. Much like the Samaritan woman at the well. Could the **former youth minister walk into Peace and share his** wavering faith and find folks here who would listen while walking beside him as he sought to journey toward the well of living water again? Could the homeless, unwed teenager, find a place of refuge in Peace or would she be judged as she was elsewhere? Who are the people who come to our “community well” and how are we receiving them? Seemingly the woman at the well had been **judged and perhaps even ridiculed for having had so** many husbands. Can you imagine in your victimization, your grief, and in the pain of either divorce or the death of a partner having people whispering behind your back, judging and condemning *you*, the victim? This woman went to the well at noon, instead of the cool of the day with the rest of the women because she wanted to avoid them. She **was a woman living with a man, perhaps as a concubine** or perhaps as a part of Levirate marriage. It was a loveless arrangement and based upon the scene described she was also without benefit of friends. She had to be tired not only from carrying the heavy jars, but tired by the weight of all the emotional baggage she carried in **her loneliness, pain, disappointment, loss and victimization**.

Then, unexpectedly, while going about her everyday existence she had a face to face encounter with the Messiah, the “living water.” In the original language this phrase, “living water,” **meant water that was moving and not stagnate. Think of a** flowing river or stream. So the woman has a face to face encounter with the Messiah, the One whose spirit moves among us in whatever direction it chooses, like the wind. It is this encounter that helps this woman to see herself as she is seen and known by the Divine. **Jesus reveals to her all that she has ever done**. It is interesting to note that there is no condemnation here on the part of Jesus towards this woman. In the words of Rob Bell, we see here that “Love Wins.” She finds acceptance, she discovers that **despite all that her community would see her as or label her as**, she is accepted by God. Her sins are forgiven, her life has value, and she is received into

the kin-dom of God. Think of your own life, what is it to know that you are fully seen by God? Just as God knows all the joys of your heart, God knows every broken place as well. In her exuberance and joy in being seen, the Samaritan woman leaves the burdens of her former life behind. She leaves the jars at the well and she runs to tell the very group that has isolated her and abandoned her, in many ways, the Good News. She sheds the burdens of her old identity **so that she may be filled and so that she can help others** fill themselves on the living water found in Jesus. What would you leave behind at the well? What do you need to empty yourself of in order to take in the living water offered to us in Jesus the Christ?

We know as people of faith that to have an experience with Jesus is to change who we are. We are to die to our old ways and take on a new life that reflects Christ's **presence within us. A life that reflects the loving** presence of Christ challenges us to care for our enemies, to care for one another, and it reflects our understanding that salvation is not ours alone. A life that reflects the loving presence of Christ is one that understands that we are **fully known** by God and that while we find forgiveness, there is the call upon us to live a life of faith, we are to share the Good News, to share the living water with others. It is Jesus who says to us: "*But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.<sup>36</sup> The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.<sup>37</sup> For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.'<sup>38</sup> I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.*" (Jn. 4)

In encountering Jesus we have entered into labor, much like the Samaritan woman at the well. What do you need to leave behind at the well? What do you need to empty yourself of in order to take in the living water? In the taking in we know that **our lives are to be changed and it is we who have been given** the call to share the loving presence of Christ, the living water, with those who are lonely, who thirst for the Good News, who seek community, seek salvation, and God's grace. We are to say to others, "*Come and see...*" Amen