

Encounters with Jesus: High Noon at Jacob's Well

John 4:4-42

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

It is “high noon” at Jacob’s Well and the scorching mid-day sun is beating down.

Jesus and his disciples have stopped at this well, made famous by the fact that the patriarch Jacob met the love of his life Rachel there.

Now another kind of encounter between a man and a woman takes place—
not a courtship, but a conversation—
in fact, the longest recorded conversation Jesus has with anyone in the gospels.

It is a deeply spiritual and theological conversation, with every bit as much drama as the 1952 classic film that starred Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly.

In this “high noon” encounter with Jesus we learn some important lessons about love and acceptance,
and we discover that Jesus offers something no amount of money can buy.

II

Let’s set the stage: Jesus and his disciples have left Jerusalem and are heading home to Galilee because opposition to him is growing in Jerusalem.

The shortest route from Jerusalem to Galilee was through Samaria.

Most Jews, however, would take the longer route across the Jordan River and up the east bank to avoid setting foot in Samaria.

Jews and Samaritans were separated by a figurative wall of ethnic and religious animosity as high and intractable as the actual wall that today separates Israelis and Palestinians.

Samaria used to be part of Israel.

But 900 years earlier the united monarchy of David and Solomon divided into northern and southern kingdoms—

Israel with its capital city Samaria in the north,
and Judah with its capital Jerusalem in the south.

Two hundred years later, the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom,
destroyed Samaria,
deported much of the population,
and brought in thousands of foreigners from other conquered
regions to repopulate the ravaged land.

After seven centuries of inter-marriage, Samaria looked like an ethnic mess to the pure-blooded Hebrews of Jerusalem.

To make matters worse, the Samaritans began to fiddle with the rituals and rules of the Hebrew religion.

They went so far as to suggest that the holy mountain where God was to be worshiped was not Mt. Zion, where the Jewish Temple was,
but a mountain in Samaria, Mt. Gerizim.

Over the centuries the acrimony grew and festered
so that Jews didn't even want to be near Samaritans,
didn't want to have contact with them,
eat with them,
drink with them—
and the feeling was mutual.

So Jesus and his followers are walking on the road home and John says “they had to go through Samaria.”

My guess is that it was Jesus who said, “We're going though Samaria.”

I can't imagine his followers were very happy about it.

But Jesus is on a mission to bring the light of God's grace and truth to a world of darkness and death,
including the despised people of Samaria.

III

So at high noon Jesus sends his disciples into the village to buy food,
and while he rests by the well, a woman comes to draw water.

A remarkable conversation begins with a simple request:
Jesus asks her for a drink.

Actually, it's not so simple.

A Jewish man did not initiate conversation with an unknown woman—
to do so was just plain improper.

A Jewish teacher, for that is what Jesus was, did not engage in public
conversation with *any* woman.

Jews did not invite contact with Samaritans.

Jesus is talking with a woman and he's proposing to drink from a defiled, unclean,
Samaritan cup.

She is stunned.

"You know better than that," she says. "Jews don't drink from a Samaritan cup."

*"If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking me
for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water."*

Now she is intrigued.

*"Sir, you don't even have a bucket to draw with, and this well is deep. So
how are you going to get this 'living water'? Are you a better man than our
ancestor Jacob, who dug this well and drank from it, he and his sons and
livestock, and passed it down to us?"*

When the woman at the well says, "You have no bucket and the well is deep," she is making an accurate assessment of the situation based on appearances.

In effect she is saying,

"The task is monumental and you do not have the means to accomplish it."

I hear her voice often when I find myself standing next to a deep well with no bucket...

when I am facing a situation that exceeds my human abilities alone to address.

Maybe you have just been given more responsibilities at work (with no pay increase) and you wonder how you are possibly going to be able to fulfill these obligations.

The well is deep and you have no bucket.

Maybe a loved one is struggling with an addiction and you feel helpless in the face of its power over your loved one.

The well is deep and you have no bucket.

We may feel this way in the face of the suffering of people in our community—
 children undergoing abuse,
 parents with jobs that don't pay enough to make ends meet,
 young people dying of drug overdoses.

"You have no bucket and the well is deep," says the woman at the well,
 as Jesus, the one who alone can quench the thirst within her,
 sits next to the well.

IV

How does Jesus respond to this dilemma of a deep well and no bucket?

He talks about spiritual sustenance,
 the living water that you don't need a bucket to receive:

“Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.”

Jesus always stands beside us.

He sits by the deepest well.

He places himself at our side in the most monumental tasks
and the most hopeless situations.

He is, throughout the Gospel of John,
the living water,
the bread of life,
the light of the world,
the gate,
the Good Shepherd,
the resurrection and the life,
the way, the truth and the life,
and the true vine.

And he is right next to us,
in the heat of the day
and at the height of our fatigue.

As we stand beside a deep well with no bucket,
our spiritual sustenance is not a far-off prize to be earned,
but a close resource, around us and within us
and available in each passing moment.

The woman responds with a deep spiritual longing:

“Sir, give me this water so I won’t ever get thirsty, won’t ever have to come back to this well again!”

Then Jesus abruptly changes the subject. “Go get your husband.”

Another huge issue is starting to emerge.

“I’m not married,” she says.

“Right,” he says, “but you have had five husbands, and the man you are currently hooked up with is not your husband.”

She is astonished.

They talk a little more about whose mountain is the real holy mountain.

Jesus brushes off the whole issue by suggesting that God, the God of all people, Jews and Samaritans, seeks the love and devotion of people, regardless of their tribe, nationality, religion, and obviously gender.

Eugene Peterson translates verses 23-24 this way:

It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.”

“I know the Messiah is coming,” she says, and “when he arrives we’ll get the whole story.”

That’s when Jesus drops his biggest bombshell:

“I am he. You don’t have to wait any longer or look any further.”

V

Just then his disciples return with food.

They are astonished—what in the world is going on here?

We leave him alone for an hour and he ends up talking with a woman, a Samaritan woman no less.

The best part of the story comes next.

When the woman realizes that Jesus knows the truth about her life,
 she leaves her water jar and runs back to her village and says,
“Come see a man who has told me everything I have ever done!”

She tells of a man who accepts her as she is—
 a woman,
 a Samaritan—
 treats her with dignity and respect,
 and engages her in respectful conversation.

And as she tells about him she raises a provocative question:
 “He can’t be the Messiah, can he?”—
 the Savior we’ve all been waiting for, that is.

Her new life, and ours, begins when we finally recognize the identity of the man at the well.

And here is the most remarkable part of this story:
 she—Samaritan woman—is the first Christian evangelist,
 our very first preacher.

John says, *“Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony,”*

Even more unthinkable, the Samaritans invite Jesus and his friends to stay with them, and they do, for two days.

Jews and Samaritans, eating and drinking together,
 swapping stories,
 singing songs,
 watching the little ones play,
 preparing food,
 doing dishes together,
 and at the end of the day
 lying down under the same roof together.

VI

It is almost impossible for us today to comprehend the implications of this story.

Individual hearts and minds transformed...
 long-held traditions and conventions transcended...
 cultural institutions and practices transformed...
 all because Jesus has a conversation with a Samaritan woman.

Nobody ever talked like Jesus.

Nobody ever did the things he did...**nobody!**

It is so radical we still have trouble believing it.

It is customary for interpreters of this story (men, mostly) to treat the woman as a notorious sinner—
 a fallen woman,
 a harlot,
 a seductress.

The reason she came out at noon in the hottest part of the day, they suggest, was because she was a social outcast in her community,
 a woman with such a checkered past that she didn't dare come in the morning when it was cooler,
 when respectable women came to fill their water jars.

John Calvin, like most men, is fascinated with the woman's marital history and in his commentary essentially blames her for her divorces,
 even though at the time only men could initiate a divorce—
 women were powerless to do so.

Calvin concludes she was obviously a disagreeable and disobedient wife.

But there is no indication of that in the text,
 nor does Jesus see her that way.

He does not judge her,
 condemn her,
 or command her to change her ways.

We don't know a thing about her history,
 only that it is tragic.

It's almost as if Jesus doesn't care how many husbands she's had or what her current situation is.

Instead, Jesus focuses on her—

a woman—
a precious child of God,
worthy of his attention,
worthy of a respectful theological conversation.

His amazing acceptance,

his unconditional love,

his amazing grace—

are for her like a drink of cool, pure, thirst-quenching water.

It is amazing that, in spite of the fact that the first Christian evangelist was a woman, the church through much of its history has refused to allow women to be ordained as ministers.

In our Presbyterian Church it was only 63 years ago, in 1954, that the first woman was ordained, and still in many denominations, including most of the other Presbyterian denominations, women are kept on the outside, unable to be ordained and to fully and freely use their gifts in the service of Christ's church.

It is amazing how Jesus pushes past convention,

crosses theological, ecclesiastical, and political boundaries,

and welcomes everyone,

no strings attached,

no questions asked.

He brings together ideological enemies, who eat and drink together and become friends.

Is there a word here about civility and how people talk to one another and relate to one another?

Is there a word about the common good and the way it is sacrificed today on the altar of social and political ideology? I think so.

We are so divided politically—
 liberals vs. conservatives,
 Democrats vs. Republicans,
 Trumpers vs. non-Trumpers.

We are so divided that important work no longer gets done because to cooperate and compromise (when did that become a dirty word?) for the sake of the common good might just bring credit to the other side.

Is there a word in this 2,000-year-old story about a man who transcends ideology and ends up eating and drinking for two days with his ideological opponents? I think so.

VII

And finally, this is a very personal word.

The great African American theologian Howard Thurman told about the time he and his wife took their two daughters on a trip through the South.

At a rest stop, his daughters saw the playground and headed toward the swings.

They didn't see the sign that said "Whites only."

Dr. Thurman patiently tried to explain why they couldn't use the swings, and they began to cry. So just as his mother had done for him, he gathered them in his big arms and said,

"Listen, you little girls are really somebody. You are so important and valuable to God that it takes the governor and lieutenant governor and the whole state police force to keep you little girls from those swings."

That's what Jesus did for a Samaritan woman one day so long ago.

And it is the basic Christian message, the promise that comes across the centuries to you and me this morning.

No matter who you are—
 no matter what your upbringing,
 no matter the color of your skin,

or your gender identity,
or your sexual orientation.

No matter where you are on your spiritual journey—
committed church member,
confident in your spirituality and beliefs,
or not a member,
not sure what you believe,
searching,
here today because you heard the choir was great...
and you are trying to find some answers.

No matter what you believe or find you cannot believe...

No matter what you are doing with your life at this moment—
working or not working...
parenting or not parenting...
married or not....

No matter what, the radical and absolutely unique message of the Gospel is that in
Jesus Christ,
God crosses all the boundaries and barriers of our lives
and comes to each of us,
wherever we are,
whatever we are doing,
whoever we have been in the past
and whoever we are now.

He knows all there is to know about us and he still offers us Living Water.

**This is Living Water: to know that you are loved and accepted by God, in
Jesus Christ.**

To him be all praise and glory!

Amen.

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