

A Sermon for DaySpring  
By Eric Howell

John 4:5-42  
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This Sunday's gospel reading presents Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman, the woman at the well. We haven't met the woman at the well in a long, long time. She may be well known to you, friends with you from a long time ago, but collectively together, this is our first time to be out at that well with Jesus, with her, in a long time, though when we are with her, we may find that we recognize ourselves in her more than we thought possible.

She was a Samaritan woman. The Samaritans, including this woman, lived in Samaria which is geographically adjacent to the regions where Jews, including Jesus, lived. The two groups of people had a long, intertwined, tense history. The Samaritans were considered heretics by the Jews, second-class citizens. Yet Jesus and his disciples stop beside a well in Samaria. The disciples go looking for something to eat. Jesus stays at the well. He is tired. He is thirsty. A woman arrives to draw water, and he asks her for a drink.

The well is near her home in the town of Sychar. Since dawn she's probably been working. Every day is work. There's hardly any rest when your daily bread has to be earned daily. Everyone works but not everyone has the same life. Her life has been rocky. We're not told enough to know everything, but we know a few things about her story.

How much do we know about anyone's story? If nothing else, this story reminds us that everyone we meet, those we think we know well and those we just briefly encounter have a story that makes them who they are. Getting to really know someone is partly being trusted to hold their story with grace. This past week I had the privilege of leading a group of seminary students in a class on creation care and Christian spirituality. We just returned yesterday from Robert and Melinda Creech's farm near San Antonio. One of the things we talked about was that we are all members of the web of creatures whether we recognize it or not. If you eat or drink you are taking part in the membership of creation. A spirituality of that membership includes recognizing our place with the creatures and moving from membership to deep communion. We do that first by paying attention to what or who is with us: it can be attention to a flower or a tree and what makes that flower or tree unique, or in giving thanks for the food on our plate and those who made it possible, or to the person who is right in front of us. Melinda and Robert modeled this for us. They know the names of not just the wildflowers, but even the names the grasses. It's paying attention to who or what is in front of us.

Being part of church, I was thinking on the way home from the farm, is where we learn to do this. We are asked to slow down, to still our bodies, and to silence all the thoughts that knock around in our minds, to be real with God and others, to read scripture carefully when we do, and to receive one another as Christ. As we do this, we move from membership toward deep communion with God and with one another sharing life together. Giving and receiving

communion at the Lord's Table is like a training ground for the communion made possible by the giving and receiving of love for one another.

Part of her story that she shares with others who are like her in ways that are beyond her understanding: she is a Samaritan in Samaria, which means she's among her people. Jews lived in Galilee and Judea to the north and to the south. Every Samaritan knew that the Jews looked down on them for reasons that mostly surpassed her theological understanding. She just knew the Jews were obsessed with Jerusalem and believed that God could only truly be worshipped there. She didn't understand why that was. Her people thought God could be worshipped just fine right here where they were. That made sense to her.

Another thing we come to know is that this woman belongs to her alone. She has had five husbands, and the man she's living with now is not her husband. We can't see behind the narrative veil to know why. Did they die? Did she kill them? Did people think she did? Did they divorce her or her each of them? But at the least what we know is that life has been hard on the heart, no matter the reasons.

The third thing we know is that she's alone. Alone at the well, at noon, in the heat of the day, in a hot part of the world. That tells us just about everything. Going to the well is a practical and social event of the day. The only one who goes alone, at noon, in the heat of the day is one who's, for whatever reason, on the outside of community. There's a singularity here, that looks a lot like loneliness.

A woman alone in a man's world. A Samaritan in a Samaritan's world enclosed in a Jewish world. The woman at the well. The alone Samaritan woman at the well. The sad, scandalous Samaritan woman at the well all alone. Where she meets on this day a tired, thirsty Jewish man.

A Jewish man at a well without a bucket.

Jesus can do a lot of things with water. He can walk on it; he can calm it; he can turn it into wine. But apparently, he can't draw it up from a well if he doesn't have a bucket. And he has no bucket.

Water, water everywhere down there and not a drop I can drink. Good thing for him she comes along at the wrong time of day. Good thing for her he has come along this way to the wrong place. Neither one of them really should be there in that moment.

Wrong place, wrong time. Wrong people. When everything goes wrong is when grace goes to work among those willing to risk communion.

The musical *Come From Away* tells the true story of the small town of Gander in Newfoundland, Canada that unexpectedly found itself on the receiving end of international flights grounded at their airport on September 11, 2001. In no way were the townspeople prepared for something

like this. There was the practical matter of what do you do with and for hundreds of people who have nothing but overnight bags . . . And there's the even more challenging issues—what do you do with people who are, to put it nicely, not from here.

The whole world, it seemed, had gone wrong that day. And that wrongness had come to Gander. That's when grace comes, and came to and through them as they welcomed and provided for them, and showed hospitality.

Grace, perhaps, is getting on a plane and getting off at your intended destination. I don't want to take that for granted, of course. But grace is really when you end up in a place you didn't intend and don't know what to do. That's true in geography, and it is true in life stories. When you end up in a place you didn't intend and don't know where to go from there.

Three years ago today, this story from John 4, just like today, was the gospel text assigned for our reading. Year A, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent for those who are keeping score. But this story went unpreached that day here and many places because the sanctuary was quiet and closed up that day, and the doors were locked. We'd been warned earlier in the week. Covid is coming and it's going to change everything. Now it was here; whatever it was, we didn't really know; for it to be here was something we didn't really understand. But here we were. We'd ended up in a place we certainly didn't intend and were trying to figure out in real time where to go from here. Just zoom the service. Live stream it. What's live stream and what's zoom? Who knew? Just meet outside in the oak grove. We have an oak grove? That's fantastic. Well, would you look at that?

I don't intend to rehearse a long oral history of Covid. I just wanted to note that it was today, three years ago, that we didn't come near the woman at the well. She was out there all alone, at least out there all alone with Jesus. And we weren't there to listen in.

This Sunday in the liturgical cycle that DaySpring went empty. Cancelling church on a Sunday wasn't an entirely new experience for me. I pastored churches in places that get more snow and ice than we do and more snow and ice than they can deal with and so we'd have to cancel church once or twice a year. Some of you have never left Texas and have had never experienced that so it blew your mind on top of everything else that was going on. I remember someone said when we made the announcement that we were cancelling. It stuck with me, "I can't believe we don't have church on a Sunday. We need church right now more than ever."

I got it. I get it. But sometimes you end up in a place you didn't intend, and you do the best you can to figure out what to do now. Sometimes you just keep going to the well to get water. Sometimes you're there, and you don't have a bucket.

During the long season of covid adaptations, I heard two things from you as much as anything. The two things I heard the most from you when you thought about church were: "I miss the choir." And "I miss taking communion." You didn't say you missed sermons. Noted. So this one's twice as long. You missed the two things that took the longest to come back to: the choir

and taking communion, but that's not really why you missed them. These are both things that no one can do alone, and both are practices by which individuals move from membership to deeper communion. You missed them because you were in a world where you were alone, and the deeper communion that you shared had been reduced to a digital membership. And that's not enough. Seeing pictures of living water is not enough. Thinking about it is not enough. You want to taste it; you want to drink it. We have an instinct and a desire and a spiritual hunger and thirst that can only be quenched by the physical realities of Christ's good presence to us in and through one another.

The thing is they were right here. We have a choir. But all the science told us they shouldn't sing. We have all we need for communion—there's plenty of bread where we are. But we couldn't receive. It felt a little like being thirsty in the heat of the day right by a deep well of cool water, but I've got no bucket.

Grace comes when everything goes wrong. It causes us to remember and reflect, to celebrate and be mindful of all those places in our lives where grace has come when so much went wrong. You have your story. Everyone has their story.

In this story in the gospel, two extremely socially distanced persons meet. Jesus, with no bucket, can't draw up water, but he can draw up from the depths of the human experience: truth and intimacy and acceptance and awe from the deep well of the soul of the person standing with him. Of all our souls. That's what Jesus does, he draws up and draws out from the human heart all that is buried deep down beneath layers of regrets and insecurity and anxieties and errors and pains and questions. All that is down there in the deep.

He draws it up and draws it out, and he doesn't need a bucket. He has truth, and he has compassion; when we draw near Jesus, he draws us out of ourselves. He knew more about this woman's story than she thought possible, and he seemed to handle her story with penetrating truth and gentle grace.

The woman was amazed: You must be a prophet.

Yes, I suppose.

You must be Messiah. She knew more about him than he thought possible.

Yes, I am. The one speaking to you is he.

I wonder how long it had been since anyone had really spoken to her, communicating with her. How long had it been since someone had shared the deep communion of truth and grace with her?

But on this day, this day of grace, she is with the savior, and the drink she receives is living water.

When you share your water or your food or your time or attention with someone else, you share your life. At the well where water is shared, we hear the words of life, and we become

part of the transformation of the world. This is the gospel's ultimate vision of good news. The one who is alone becomes part of community. The one whose life is broken becomes whole, and the most unlikely of people becomes the gospel bearers. (Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 121.)

This is also a eucharistic image. A person encountering the Messiah is how we can imagine ourselves when we share communion because ultimately that's what it is, a physical encounter with the living God in which none of us are left alone. In the giving and receiving of communion, Jesus gives us physically, nourishment for our souls, embrace of the outsider, reformation of the world, and revelation of himself. On this day, three years removed from that day, let us come grateful that grace has brought us back to the Table, with him, with her, brought us back here even after so much went wrong in the world for all of us, and grace welcomes you here, however your story has gone so very right or so very wrong. It is grace that brings us here to give and receive these signs of Christ who is with us, living even now.

Amen.

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