

John 4:5-42
March 27, 2011

South Plains

The Quest for Water

Samaria was not where Jesus wanted to go. But, the shortest route from Judea to Galilee was the hot, dusty track through Samaria. About noon, Jesus found himself tired and thirsty and confronted by a petulant woman. It was not a likely setting for pleasant conversation, and none occurred.

From the start nothing went quite right. Most Jews, traveling as Jesus did, would have chosen the slightly longer detour around to the east of Samaria in order to avoid just the kind of situation Jesus fell into. Samaritans were different. There are certain neighborhoods we do not drive through, certain people we avoid meeting with direct eye contact, perhaps even certain people we never sit with in church. It's easier to avoid a confrontation with someone with whom we have so little in common.

Regardless of how it came about, Jesus finds himself in unfriendly territory during the middle of the day when Palestinian travelers ordinarily would have sought shelter from the burning heat of the sun. Not only travelers avoided the road at noon. Working people arose by dawn to take advantage of the cool morning for beginning daily chores. Chores such as drawing water from Jacob's well, especially for a stranger.

And, it was a chore to haul water up from a well that had been hand-dug 100 feet through the soil and soft rock, even if it was the historic water supply for the Patriarch Jacob centuries earlier. It was woman's work in those days, as it is today in many parts of the world. The women carried with them a bucket made of goat skin attached to a long rope. The well's association with Jacob, plus its depth, assured the people of fresh water and made it a popular place to go despite the extra effort. But, Jesus did not have a bucket. In a land where water is of a scarce commodity, simple courtesy says that one will supply a traveler with water.

And, simply courtesy would have by-passed the opportunity for any significant conversation. This relationship, however, was conceived in trouble and born in argument. This woman who came to draw water at this unlikely time of the day did not want to be courteous. Something inside her was looking for a quarrel. Maybe someone at home knocked over the first jar of water she had drawn earlier in the day. Maybe her unsavory reputation for wearing out husbands forced her to come to the well when no one else was there to talk about her? Maybe it was simply the sight of a stranger, a Jewish stranger that set her off.

You've known people like that Samaritan woman. Tightly set lips. Sharp eyes. Typically standing with hands on hips as if waiting for the next outrage to send her into orbit. This woman did not want to accommodate

herself to anyone that day; and the writer of John's gospel builds most of the story around her stubborn intransigence. Or, was Jesus baiting her into a fight. If there were a sub-title, it might read, "How to miss the point and keep on talking." She and Jesus seem to speak at cross purposes to each until the very end.

He asks for a drink. "What!" she says. "You, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink of water?" She was the wrong gender, the wrong race, the wrong religion, and it was the wrong time of day to be asking for a drink. You see, Serbs and Albanians did not invent the notion of ethnic purity. Blacks and whites did not invent racism. Jews and Muslims did not invent religious warfare. Those old demons have been around since the dawn of time. Furthermore, the conflict in the gospel is not abstract. The barbed comments about a woman who has had five husbands are a pretty strong hint to the reader that Jesus and this particular Samaritan woman carried fundamentally different baggage where values were concerned.

Small wonder they made little headway understanding each other. I must admit that Jesus does not help the situation with his response. "If you knew who it is who is asking you for a drink, you would ask him and he would give you living water." In other words, "You're dumb as dirt, lady."

The phrase "living water" has a double meaning. Ordinarily in that part of the world, it meant fresh, running

water from a stream as opposed to the stagnant water from a puddle or cistern. Jesus also means to use "living water" as a figure of speech for eternal life in the Spirit. But, she can't know that. It starts out as one of these hopeless conversations, doomed to go round in circles until one or the other gets tired and quits. I've had conversations like that, and you have too. Sometimes the nicest thing we can say is that we agree to disagree.

So, we may wonder why Jesus presses on when the woman seems so dense. There's an old nursery rhyme that goes like this:

Mother, may I go and swim?
Yes, my darling daughter;
Hang your clothes on yonder limb,
But don't go near the water.

The daughter in that rhyme has grown up to become the Samaritan woman, dancing around the living water, coming close but never getting wet. A lot of us are like that with Christianity. We hang around the church because we like the people or the food or even, God help us, the sermons. But we never, never allow ourselves to be so much as splashed by the living water of eternal life. We play with our religion, talking about God without talking with God. By keeping the Holy Spirit at arms-length we are effectively shielded from getting wet. Eventually, we cannot even imagine having the ruts and wrinkles of our minds rinsed clean by the fresh waters of baptism. We don't have a clue about new life. We're as dense as that woman at the well, standing with Jesus,

close to the water of life, but so often determined not to get wet.

Arlene DeBevoise muses about our resistance to this living water in a poem called "If Only There Were Some Other Option."

If only there were some other option
Than this close-knit web of
Good News and unpleasant truth;
Something pliable like
Rules for membership
In a socially acceptable club,
Something sweetly imprecise
To espouse or not
Depending on the state of one's mind or
digestion. ("A Sort Of Creed")

I love that last line because it suggests that all too often we treat Christian faith as though following Jesus depends on a whim or the state of our digestion. The alternative to faith is to avoid prayer matters, faith matters, God matters. Some people prefer to stand beside the well and talk about drinking, study the water table and the distribution system of the church, petition the government for help, and even go to court, anything but drinking the waters of faith. It's like talking about faith without trusting, without ever loving our enemies, without the reckless generosity of giving a tithe, and never stooping to wash another person's feet. In other words, we don't give up or do anything for Lent, or for any other season of the year.

If you read on to the end of the story, the Gospel never records that the woman gave Jesus the drink of water he asked for. He remains thirsty because she remains argumentative. But, and here's the point John is making in one of his longest stories. Her misunderstanding finally becomes the occasion for a revelatory moment. What started badly, ends well. Jesus and his disciples stay over in Samaria for two days. The woman becomes a believer along with many more from the town. If people play around the water long enough, by the grace of God they're going to get wet. That's one reason I don't like to scare visitors away.

Two things impress me about the conversation with the woman at the well: her stubbornness and the stubbornness of God. Being stubborn may not seem like much of a virtue, but it's all she's got and it's enough for God to work with. Like a dog with a bone, she won't let go until she gets some meat from Jesus. If you find yourself arguing with God and with the Presbyterians, don't give up.

Then, there's Jesus. He won't let go either, just as he does not let go of you and me. No matter how many relationships we may have messed up, he persists. Remember, she had five husbands and seems to be working on number six.

No matter how sarcastic, discourteous or argumentative;

No matter how often we play with Christianity
without putting our hearts into a conversation with God;

No matter how dense we are, God does not give
up.

I suppose that stubbornness is why some of us
are here this morning. Every week we pray and sing and
read and confess and give over and over again, hoping
something will happen. And, every week Jesus invites us
to come closer and get wet with eternal life. (splash)