

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
30 January 2022

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Living Water”

Fourth Sermon in the Eight-week Series: *What Jesus Serves Up*

John 4:1-42

New Revised Standard Version

We are in week four of our series, “What Jesus Serves Up.” And it’s time to stop dining and just take a sip of water. I’m thirsty. And I know you are too.

Imagine enjoying a refreshing glass of water that is served just how you like it. Sparkling or tap. Lemon or no lemon. Ice or no ice. Straw or no straw. Evian. SmartWater. Perrier. Topo Chico. Hint. LaCroix. Fiji. Dasani. Waterloo. Ethos. Spindrift. Voss. Aquafina. Pick your favorite – and let Jesus pour it out and fill your cup.

In today’s text, when we are most parched, Jesus offers us the thirst quencher we need at the very moment we need it. It’s custom made for our circumstances and for our story. And in so doing, he refreshes us so deeply that we are able to get up from the Table for a moment and become the host ourselves – inviting others to “come and

see,” drink and dine, hope and be healed. To drink of the Living Water is to drink from a source that never runs out – a source that flows freely into us and through us in such a way that *our* very lives become the stream from which others can drink and be refreshed too.

Sounds glorious, doesn’t it?

It’s making me thirstier.

But that’s good because today’s text invites us to allow our thirst to be the thing that keeps us at the Table of Christ as long as we can. 42 verses makes for a *really* long passage. But did you know that the conversation between Jesus and the woman he meets at the well in Samaria is actually the longest recorded conversation in the New Testament!¹ One of the most impactful parts of this passage is the sheer length of the conversation between two

¹ Lindsey S. Jodrey, “Commentary on John 4:1-42,” *Working Preacher* (Feb. 4, 2018), accessed on Jan. 30, 2022 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/the-woman-at-the-well/commentary-on-john-41-42>.

people who were never supposed to be talking to one another in the first place, let alone in the light of day for all the world to see.

There is so much meaning in this text, more than I can address in one sermon. But John fully expects us to be comparing this conversation to the one we read last week – they are almost presented as foils to each other. Not to pit one against the other – one being good and the other being bad – but rather, to show us the expansiveness and inclusiveness of Jesus’ love and attention. He talks to anybody. Anywhere. At any time. Jesus is fully available to every single one of us. And whoever we are and however we come to him and whatever our need is – Jesus stays in conversation with us. And offers us his very presence as Living Water until we are filled up enough to go and be that blessing of a beverage for someone else.

So let’s look at these two stories. Last week we saw Nicodemus come and seek out Jesus privately in the veil of night (as Morgan so beautifully put it) in Jerusalem – the city of public faith and power. Nicodemus has a name. He is a respected, powerful man. He

comes to Jesus on his turf in the conditions that will most protect him. (It’s a privilege that he even has that choice, isn’t it? To move around by himself at night safely?) He is a Jew. A Pharisee in fact, a learned teacher, an “insider” in the faith tradition of Jesus. Nicodemus, who questions Jesus, earnestly or not, we don’t really know – he speaks fairly sparsely and leaves us with the question: “How can these things be?” And the whole interaction is actually more of a monologue by Jesus than a conversation between the two of them. We are left not knowing if Nicodemus came to belief or greater understanding or not. Perhaps you could say that this teacher is taking a moment to be a student. To listen and learn. And we do find out later in John’s Gospel that Nicodemus stands up for Jesus when other Pharisees are calling him out and he even tenderly takes his body down off the cross and lays it in the tomb. Whatever Jesus told Nicodemus that night, did indeed transform him.

This week, Jesus chooses to travel through Samaria, enemy territory for most Jews, and tired from his travels, he stops in Sychar at Jacob’s well to rest. Jesus, a man, is sitting at a place that really wasn’t for any man to

be sitting at – *unless* they had their eye on a woman for marriage. That's what wells represent in the Old Testament. Rebekah was approached at the well to marry Isaac (Gen. 24:13). Jacob met Rachel at the well (Gen. 29:9), and Moses also had his first encounter with his future wife Zipporah at a well (Ex. 2:16).

You can see why the disciples were so shocked to see Jesus at a well with a woman! It's like that old children's rhyme: "Janie and Tommy, Sitting in a Tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Janie with a baby carriage." Well back then the disciples' rhyme would have been: *"First comes a well, then comes marriage, then comes Jesus with a baby carriage!"* They're taken aback at this sight and what it might mean!

Of course, Jesus never allows the shock of society to cause him to shy away from someone.

Jesus was in a land not his own, at a place that was not his to be sitting at without the purpose of marriage. And interestingly, whereas Nicodemus was the one in expressed need coming to Jesus at night, here, Jesus is the one in need – thirsty – when a

woman, who is not named in the text, comes to the well at noon – in the Light of Day. She is vulnerable and without power in her culture and society. And – she is a Samaritan.

If Jesus is an "insider" as a Jew, she would then be considered an "outsider." Or, if she is the "insider" in her land of Samaria, then she would be ostracized as one now talking to an "outsider" (a Jew), thus making her an "outsider" by association with him. Either way this encounter is marginalizing her even more. Yet, even though these obvious things make the woman quite different from Nicodemus – Gender, Status, Ethnicity, Religion – perhaps the *biggest difference* between the two comes is their conversation.

The woman is actively engaged in conversation with Jesus and something that begins on a transactional level – Jesus asking her to get him a drink of water – moves quite quickly to a spiritual level as she asks further questions of Jesus about how he can be talking to her and what he means when he says he offers Living Water that will cause her not to thirst again. She doesn't just accept what he says at face value. She keeps questioning until she follows what he says –

which is quite theological. She brings up Jacob's well – their common, shared ancestor – and *that* then leads them to the relational level – of getting to know one another even more deeply.

Jesus, knowing the five husbands she has had, *sees her* and knows the pain she is in from her past. Which leads her to know he is a prophet – one who's able to name truth without personal judgment. It's a moment of trust-building in the conversation. She does not feel judged. She actually feels seen and known. Someone knows her story and is naming it without mockery or embarrassment or confusion. And this leads her to think he not only can be trusted, but that he knows something about faith, and she starts to ask him about the worship styles of Jews and Samaritans (Jews worship in Jerusalem, Samaritans in their own land on this mountain) and very quickly, the conversation is now theological *and* liturgical! Jesus quells all the worship wars (then and now, by the way!) by saying location and style of worship do not matter – what matters is the spirit and truth of your worship – WHO you worship matters, not HOW you worship. In response to Jesus'

answer about WHO we worship being most important, the woman responds with her knowledge that the Messiah is coming, and when Jesus says, "I am he" that is enough to spark an eager curiosity in the woman.

But the text doesn't say she immediately believes him at his word. It does say that she leaves her bucket at the well, meaning she came with one kind of thirst, and left without need of that thirst being quenched – for she had experienced a taste of something more lasting. Someone who was willing to be in conversation with her – *her*, a woman that Jesus had no business talking to for all kinds of reasons – and who had treated her as an equal in conversation and relationship. And remember – this is not just chit chat! This is the kind of conversation that reminds me of my days at divinity school after class with fellow church nerds – this is graduate level stuff, mind you!

When the woman goes back to her city, she then becomes a witness. And it's not because she proclaims to them some truth she has discovered in an absolute form. It's because she invites them to "come and see" what she has seen. And then she

asks a question alongside them, *“He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”* (vs 29) Almost as if she’s saying, *“Surely that’d be too good to be true, right?”*

Well, the people go and see for themselves what she is talking about, WHO she is talking about...and of course at the end of the passage we learn that many believed because of her invitation to “come and see” for themselves what she had shared with them. It was no longer just because of her story, it was also because of the personal experience *they* had had with Jesus. Her story had become their story too.

Do you see how rich and beautiful and complex this conversation at the well is? It moves from transactional to spiritual to theological to relational to invitational to evangelical – and I wonder – how many of us stay in conversations long enough to have ANY of these movements or moments, let alone all of them?

How many of us – particularly when we are speaking with someone who is different than us in every way – how many of us have the patience and curiosity enough to stay in that

conversation long enough to let it change us?

Transformation happens in this text because of Time. Jesus and the woman give each other the gift of time. And you know, I bet the woman was going to the well midday because she didn’t want to spend a lot of time there. She didn’t want to get caught in conversation with others who drew their water at dawn or dusk when it was cooler. Why?

Well, not because of guilt or shame as you might have heard before, but more likely because of grief and sorrow.

Look, for a really long time this woman has gotten a bad rap. But if this woman was a prostitute the text would have said so. The gospel writers aren’t afraid to name that. If this woman needed forgiving, Jesus would have forgiven her or said something like, “Go and sin no more.” But he doesn’t.

Commentators are now working to correct years of patriarchal interpretations that have been layered on this text that have

said this woman is “loose.”² But think about it. She was *married* five times. She’s not “loose” – she’s either been “left” (divorced) OR is suffering from “loss” (death). Both would cause grief, not guilt. Imagine in your lifetime losing five close partners to death or divorce. How painful and lonely that would be?

So when Jesus sees her, he’s not seeing a woman who is sinning and living in shame, he sees a woman who has experienced untold grief in her life. Five loves and losses. And now she is in a relationship with another man, and we don’t know the circumstances. She could be engaged to him. Or she could now be living with “someone that she was dependent on, or be in what’s called a Levirate marriage (where a childless woman is married to her deceased husband’s brother in order to produce an heir yet is not always technically considered the brother’s wife). There are any number of ways, in fact, that one might imagine this woman’s story as tragic rather than scandalous.”³

To see this woman as one who had experienced great loss in her life, and yet who was still able to drink of the good news that Jesus was offering to her – is a kind of a miracle, isn’t it? Grief weighs us down. Broken relationships hurt us. Betrayal can jade us for life. Loss can feel all encompassing. Sometimes it can feel like our lives will never be the same again or that joy is not ours to have.

And yet here is a woman, who has experienced unspeakable loss, and she is able to not only receive the Living Water that Jesus is offering her...she drinks of it deeply enough to then gain a new purpose in her life – to become an effective witness for Jesus. By learning how to tell her own story in such a way that it invites other people to Jesus to bring their own stories to him too.

Truly, once again, John’s gospel is showing us that Jesus serves up authentic relationships to us. He has time to sit with us, listen to us, answer our questions, engage with us. He is not in a rush.

² Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, & Kathryn Schifferdecker, “NL Podcast 480: Woman at the Well,” *Working Preacher* (23 Jan. 2022), accessed on Jan. 30, 2022 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/480-woman-at-the-well-jan-30-2022>.

³ David Lose, “Commentary on John 4:1-42,” *Working Preacher* (Feb. 2, 2014), accessed on Jan. 30, 2022 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/woman-at-the-well/commentary-on-john-41-42-2>.

So why are we? Why are we in such a rush to get past where we are now to the next situation or circumstance of our life? Why are we in a rush to get to the next thing, the next conversation? Why are we restless for assurance and concrete belief – when what Jesus invites us to is authentic conversation and belonging?

We can come to Jesus in the veil of night. We can come to Jesus in the middle of the noonday heat. We can go to Jesus in a place we expect to find him (like a sanctuary of a church), or we can be surprised by him when he shows up in our daily lives as we're running errands. We can be someone of learned faith, or we can be someone of a different faith or no organized religion. We can be grieving and hurting, or we can think we have all the answers. **HOWEVER** we meet Jesus – he meets us.

And this is what Jesus means when he says he serves up to us Living Water. Living Water as opposed to stagnant water. Stagnant water fits into one mold, one container; it's found in one place only. Living Water continually flows as a stream; it never stops moving; it has an

eternal source with infinite destinations – those destinations being each and every one of our lives! Living Water that invites us to not only step into its stream, but to become part of the stream ourselves, so that we then can offer the Living Water to others – just as the woman does when she goes back to her village...and just as Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born of water and Spirit.

To understand Jesus as Living Water is to see him as a continual source of life and learning; there is not a rush to drink from the Well of Jesus' Love – it is always and forever available to us – and it is available for ALL of us, our whole lives long.

The conversation that Jesus and the woman engage with is long and deep and there is a gradual understanding that the woman comes to. It doesn't happen all at once. And it doesn't even happen in the course of that one conversation. Like Nicodemus, she leaves with a question on her lips. Her belief is not absolute, it is curious. Her testimony is not about conversion, it's an invitation to conversation. And her faith comes to full strength, not in isolation, but in community. The

Samaritan village, as a whole, ends up asking Jesus to stay with them for two full days, so that they can keep speaking with him. This is not a private encounter like Nicodemus had that stays hidden, this is a public conversation that continues to unfold in community.

Both Nicodemus' story and the woman's story offer us an example of encountering Jesus. And in both cases – which truly are two extremes – we see Jesus available and open, answering our questions, and seeing us for who we are – the uniqueness of our stories.

In both cases, Jesus could have said “no” to the conversation and no one would have thought anything of it. He could have just pretended to be asleep when Nicodemus came knocking in the middle of the night. And when the woman came to draw a drink at the well, he could have just walked away or just gotten his swig of water and been on his way. And no one would have faulted him.

So why does Jesus linger so long with us?

In so many ways, we are SO different than Jesus. Yet, he never pulls away – he just draws nearer to us. Why?

One of my spiritual havens during divinity school was a monastery called the Society of Saint John the Evangelist. And one of the brothers there, Br. Geoffrey Tristram, recently wrote:

“Right at the heart of the *Rule of St. Benedict* is the uncomfortable truth that the one I find difficult, the one whose “unyielding difference” irritates and annoys me, may actually be a gift of God, for my conversion – they are the one who will ultimately be my best teacher. The Benedictine understanding of holiness is bound up with a habitual acceptance of the *otherness*...we are challenged to see in the one who [is different than us in any way] an agent of our ongoing transformation in Christ...”⁴

We aren't transformed by sameness. If we are thirsty, perhaps it's because we are drinking the same thing all the time.

⁴ Br. Geoffrey Tristram, “Finding Holiness in the Sanctuary of Difference,” *The Society of Saint John the Evangelist* (May 25, 2021), accessed on Jan. 30, 2022 at

<https://www.ssje.org/2021/05/25/finding-holiness-in-the-sanctuary-of-difference/>.

As Rowan Williams writes, “A great deal of our politics, our ecclesiastical life, [and] often our personal life as well, is dominated by the assumption that everything would be all right, if only some people would go away.” This assumption seems to have deeply infected our country and our politics during the turmoil of these past years of divisiveness and partisanship. But this desire that certain people should just ‘go away’ seems so contrary to the spirit of welcome and sanctuary [to which Christ calls us].”⁵

Christ draws us all in together, leaving no one out. Christ challenges us to look again at the one who is not like us because they are the very gift we need from God. Whether we’re Nicodemus, or the Woman at the Well, or Anne Scalfaro, or You – it’s important to see our story as part of THE Story, Jesus’ Story. But it’s also important to realize that Jesus’ story includes the lives and stories of everyone else too.

David Whyte defines the word in courage in the following way: *“Courage is a word that tempts us to think outwardly, to run bravely against opposing fire, to*

do something under besieging circumstance, and perhaps, above all, to be seen to do it in public, to show courage; to be celebrated in story, rewarded with medals, given the accolade, but a look at its linguistic origins is to look in a more interior direction and toward its original template, the old Norman French, Coeur, or heart.

Courage is the measure of our heartfelt participation with life, with another, with a community, a work; a future. To be courageous is not necessarily to go anywhere or to do anything except to make conscious those things we already feel deeply and then to live through the unending vulnerabilities of those consequences. To be courageous is to seat our feelings deeply in the body and in the world: to live up to and into the necessities of relationships that often already exist with things we find we already care deeply about: with a person, a future, a possibility in society, or with an unknown that begs us on and always has begged us on. To be courageous

⁵ Tristram, *ibid.*

is to stay close to the way we are made."⁶

We are made to be in relationship with one another. This week, what can you do to stay close to your source, to the Living Water that made you and flows through you? It may mean drinking from a well that you didn't expect to find yourself at, or engaging in a conversation that would have been easier to tune out from instead of tune in to.

For all of us who are thirsty, my prayer is that we find and drink from the Living Water that Jesus is offering us. That we might be able to lay down the bucket we've always brought with us (that's kind of like a security blanket) – a bucket of our preconceived notions and thoughts and assumptions – and instead let ourselves be filled by something that is impossible for us to draw up on our own...something that only comes from being in relationship with others.

If you are thirsty, take your time in finding what will quench your thirst. Try putting down your bucket so that you have a

bit more space and time to cultivate belonging.

Because the Spirit of the Living God is alive in each one of us, and finds movement and flow when we are all in this together.

Amen.

⁶ David Whyte, *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment, and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Word* (Many Rivers Press, Langley, WA: 2018), 39-40.