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March 14-15, 2020
John 4 – Samaritan Woman at the Well

A reading from the Gospel of John...

⁵[Jesus] came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

¹¹The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

²¹Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.

²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." ²⁶Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

²⁷Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" ²⁸Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him.

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

The Gospel of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

SERMON

Wells, watering holes, water fountains – all places that creatures naturally go to congregating, hydrating, and being refreshed by the cool water and, more often than not, the conversation and camaraderie. This is all true, except, of course, for the woman in our scripture reading.

In today's gospel, we meet a Samaritan woman who feels that it's the best time, and possibly the only time for her to approach the well is at high noon, when the heat of the sun is at its peak, and when there was sure to be no one around, hoping that she would be unseen and go unnoticed. Talk about your social distancing... But, lo and behold, Jesus is right there, asking for a drink himself.

Having Jesus there wouldn't be a big deal, except that she is a Samaritan woman and he is a Jewish man. If anyone were to see her talking to Jesus at the well – a Samaritan woman talking to a Jewish man, when these two individuals should never talk, never touch, not even give eye contact to one another – scandal would surely follow. You see, Samaritans and Jews had shared a founding history.

According to Associate Professor of New Testament, Sherri Brown, "Since the time after the death of Solomon when Samaria became the capitol of the kingdom that seceded from Judah, the Jewish people considered their northern counterparts apostates from true faith. Samaritans focused on the Torah and the patriarchs, while the Jewish people had a broader scriptural tradition through the prophets. Samaritans centered worship on Mount Gerizim and sought a messiah who would be a prophet like Moses. The Jews centered worship in Jerusalem and sought a messiah who would be king in the line of David."

But it's Jesus who is in Samaria, in this woman's territory, yet she is the one who wants to go to the well undetected and be alone? Within moments of meeting Jesus, we learn why she wants the living water Jesus offers... because she doesn't have to come to the well again... because of her SHAME. A shame that makes her hide from crowds and go to public places when no one else is around. A shame that kept her isolated from her community.

Surely you have seen how division and shame have ruined lives, relationships, hopes, and futures: Perhaps you've seen shame tossed back and forth recently among politicians and political parties, or shame slapped across the face of someone of Asian descent due to another's fear and hatred of this coronavirus.

The gospel writer doesn't share her history with us. This woman might have been abandoned, abused, had a disability, or was passed to her husband's brothers as a part of Levirate marriage. But since women didn't have the power to end their own marriages in the first century and having 5 husbands has yet to be seen as culturally acceptable, we can infer that her shame was overshadowing the rest of her identity as a Samaritan woman. Not only had she been unlucky and possibly unhappy when it came to finding a partner and finding love, but this shame and isolation had broken her relationship with her community.

Yet Jesus comes to this well, engages with this Samaritan woman, which was forbidden in so many ways, and speaks of a new hope, a new future, and a new life, all wrapped up in the promise and washed in the streams of living water.

In doing this, Jesus bridges the gap between the woman and her faith, between the woman and the Samaritan community. What once was social distancing had become community forming and faith deepening. What once was isolating and even adversarial has become a way for Samaritans and all those who had been previously pushed aside to be a part of the promise of new and eternal life. Isn't it amazing what God does with the brokenness in our lives?

Since Jesus comes to this woman in love and grace, breaking rules left and right, crossing social boundaries, offering what she never thought she could have and what others thought she never deserved, how much more does Jesus meet you in this way, too? Won't he do it, to those who see him as plainly as he sees us... Yes, he will!

Jesus knows our struggles and regrets, our shame, our guilt, our pain, and every other thing that holds us back from recognizing who he is; and because of who he is, holds us back from recognizing who we are... siblings with Jesus the Christ, beloved children of God.

While you continue to wash your hands for at least 20 seconds – now, and when the coronavirus has gone – be washed also with the waters of mercy and peace, where streams of forgiveness flow and shame and fear are taken away with the tide. For there is no sickness, no disease, no virus that is stronger than God's love for you.

God's love for you is wider than the ocean. God's care for you is deeper than the sea. God is with us, no matter where you are... at church, at home, in your car heading to replenished shelves at the grocery store. God cares for us and you are safe in God's care. That love is still seen through the faith-filled community around us. We are still connected to one another in our faith, by our baptism, through the relationship that you have with Jesus and the promise that God will never let you go.

We won't gather around the regular wells and watering holes, around this table and this font for a while, but I urge you to think about where and with you can you find refreshment when your life feels parched? And think about how can you offer the living water that Jesus promises to someone who feels broken and fueled by fear and uncertainty? Like the Samaritan woman, God is calling us right now to connect with people in new and exciting ways.

Frankly, God's been calling us for a while to take the good news, the wonderful ministries, to take your faith and testimony beyond the church building so that you can share the gospel and embody a message of hope and grace to others. We were made for this... to connect with God and others in these new and different ways.

The Holy Spirit continues to move in us and equip us to persevere during times like these and share Christ's love with our neighbor. We can still check on one another with a note, a phone call or a video chat, knowing that Jesus continues to travel across boundaries to meet you in times of joy and abundance, in times of sorrow and deep thirst, and in such a time as this.

May we all drink in the living water that he offers to us, this day and always. Amen.