

TEXT: John 4:5-42

Good News for the Well-Grounded

Last week, our Lenten encounter with Jesus took us out in the middle of the night to meet Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jewish people. Today's encounter takes place at noon, in broad daylight, in public, at the community well, in enemy territory, with, of all things--
—a woman.

(Read text)

At first glance, we'd be quick to assume that Nicodemus and the nameless woman at the well were as different as, well, the night and the day in which they encountered Jesus. Jew/Samaritan, man/woman, powerful/powerless, insider/outsider, one respected/the other not, which was why she came to the well at noon, rather than early in the morning when others would. One who was intentionally seeking/one who was just going through the ordinary motions of her day. But I hope that those of you who were here last Sunday heard some familiar echoes. Once again, Jesus' words, Jesus' good news, Jesus' gift is misunderstood. We eavesdroppers, we who are in the know about who Jesus is, find ourselves saying "no, no – you don't get it – not that kind of water". And yet, it is the misunderstanding that becomes the opportunity for the truth, the revelation of Jesus himself. Last week, the Pharisee Nicodemus puzzled over how to be born again. Today, we hear a woman at a well wondering about living water.

The good news here is hidden away in the Hebrew, which admittedly puts us at a disadvantage. The word we read as "living" water, and hear as spiritual stuff, is the same word

in Hebrew that means “running” water. And not running water that conjures up the image of that annoying drip, drip, drip of water running somewhere in the house. Running water as in stream, river, rapids, waterfall – water that is new, clean, fresh, moving, powerful. Water as in the words of the prophet Amos, famously quoted by Martin Luther King, Jr – “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” And in Jesus’ words “a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” Gushing – perhaps not the first word that comes to mind when describing our faith as lived out in the Presbyterian tradition. We’re not exactly gushers. We tend to be a well-grounded people. Which puts us very much in the place of the well-grounded woman – which makes us then not only witnesses of her encounter, but recipients of the good news and living water ourselves.

The living water Jesus offers is water that flows to us. As opposed to the well, where the woman had to go to draw water several times a day. A reality reflected in our own lives lived in these days and in this culture, where we are taught to be self-reliant, given a bucket and told to fill it ourselves. It’s all up to us, which can become a source of pride if we’re good at drawing the water out of life, or were even given a bucket already half full. And it can become a source of judgment over others, making us feel entitled to blame them for their own thirst, even if their bucket has rusted through. It’s a mindset where we think we are responsible for seeking God, for finding faith, for drawing from God that which we need. Unlike all of that, the living water flows to us – it is the gift of grace. There at the well, Jesus came to the bucket-carrying woman. Jesus initiated with her where she was and as she was. He came to her in an ordinary place, in the routine existence of her life. He came, he initiated in ways that were completely and doubly unexpected. He started a conversation with a woman – not what men

did in Jesus' day and culture. And beyond that, he engaged with a Samaritan. To say that Samaritans were the black sheep of the family would be an understatement – they had been kicked out of Israel family centuries before, seen as those who had betrayed their faith tradition's calling to purity by marrying others who'd settled in their land after being taken over by the Assyrians. Jews would walk miles out of their way rather than touch foot to Samaritan soil. The living water that is Jesus flowed right into Samaria – the last place the Jews thought deserved it. And it flowed right to a woman – ditto on the deserving. Because that's what grace does. No bucket required – it flows freely to all.

The living water Jesus offers flows through walls of our own making. The place of the well is a place well-grounded folks in the church know well – it is the place of tradition. The place of the way we've always done things. That well in Sychar dated back to Jacob – as in Abraham, Issac and Jacob – it was a sacred place with sacred value. They had always come there for water; and the woman became defensive at the thought that there was another way. We've been there, if we're honest – holding fast to our well places, and assuming that the suggestion of another way is casting judgment on us. Introducing a new mission project, for example, and shifting focus and resources to something new. Or a new hymnal. Or a new pastor. We grow accustomed to the wells we know. Wells by nature have walls around them, are contained, and designed to keep that water in. But living water is a powerful force. Think of Niagra Falls – what a vision of powerful water. Or the Grand Canyon – what a witness to its effect. As the saying goes, "in the confrontation between the stream and the rock, the stream always winds." Living water can wear away, wear down and bore through even the hardest and most resistant barriers. And to Jesus, the prejudices we create, the differences we dwell on,

the hate and fear we hold on to, the barriers we build to exclude others, are in the way of the gift of God. And if we cling to them, as well-grounded folks like to – then we, like the woman, are in danger of missing the point, and missing the gift that Jesus brings.

Lastly, the gift of God that is living water runs deep inside. It doesn't stay at a safe distance, like a well that you visit only when you want or need something. That living water grace of God runs down through all of our defenses, through all of our denial, flowing straight to the heart – your heart and mine – as it did to the woman's by the well that day. The Jesus who seeks us already knows us. But it's more personal than that. The Jesus who seeks you already knows you. Say it to yourself about yourself – the Jesus who seeks me already knows me. As we prayed in our Prayer of Confession, God is the one to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secret is hidden. No well is deep enough to hide things from God.

And that is good news for the well-grounded. Jesus flowed to the heart of the woman that day, telling her the truth she thought was well-hidden. But he didn't do so with a finger pointed in accusation, or a back turned in judgment. He did so with a hand held out with a gift – the gift of himself. To this woman, to this Samaritan woman, this woman with secrets and hurts and bad choices and consequences, Jesus revealed himself, gave himself. "I am he", he said, revealing himself completely to her. I am the one you are waiting for, the one who will proclaim all things, who will heal every hurt, who will make all things new and right.

Living water is a powerful force. It doesn't stay put. It can carve out new ways and crumble old ones. It can change the shape of things – and of people. It can seek you out and flow to your deepest places. And when it does, it will be like a spring of water gushing to eternal

life. A new life that begins as soon as you get your feet wet. The woman at the well immediately springs into actions, leaving her bucket behind and is transformed from an outsider in her community to an evangelist, and apostle, a leader. Her new faith changes her – and it changes her community, as she is emboldened to tell others of her encounter with Jesus.

Living water can do powerful things. Grace is amazing. And that is good news for the well-grounded. For Jesus knows that deep down, we are tired of drawing for ourselves. The holy irony is, that it's only when we put down our buckets, that we'll be truly filled. May it be so.