

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
John 4:5-42

March 2, 2008  
Rev. Robin Long

5So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. 7When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" 8(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) 9The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) 10Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." 11"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? 12Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?" 13Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." 15The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." 16He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." 17"I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. 18The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true." 19"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. 20Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." 21Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. 24God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." 25The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." 26Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

The Disciples Rejoin Jesus

27Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?" 28Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, 29"Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" 30They came out of the town and made their way toward him. 31Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something." 32But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." 33Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?" 34"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. 35Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. 36Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. 37Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. 38I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor."

Many Samaritans Believe

39Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." 40So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. 41And because of his words many more became believers. 42They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

A couple of decades ago someone had a brilliant idea. Someone, we don't know who exactly was the first to engage in this endeavor, but someone had the idea of filling plastic bottles with water and selling them to the general public. Now there's been bottled water for decades—fancy brands like Perrier or San Pellegrino. These were generally reserved for those at the top of the pecking order who found tap water pedestrian and wanted special water that would affirm their general special-ness. If that's what they need to do, fine. In fact, when I'm wanting something a little special, I occasionally indulge in an ice cold glass of San Pellegrino with a wedge of lime myself. But that's not the kind of bottled water I'm talking about this morning. I'm talking about the more than 25% of bottled water that we find on store shelves and in vending machines that's only as special as the municipal water source in Raleigh or Detroit or Portland. According to journalist Janet Jemmott, "The water is treated, purified and sold to us, often at a thousandfold increase in price. Most people are surprised to learn that they're drinking glorified tap water, but bottlers aren't required to list the source on the label."<sup>1</sup> So, a bottle of tap water from Atlanta comes to us with a picture of a mountain with a pristine stream meandering down it and we're led to believe

<sup>1</sup> Janet Majeski Jemmott, *Reader's Digest*, February 2008, pg. 120.

that we're drinking water from that very mountain stream when actually we're consuming water that comes from the end of a long pipeline of water that folks in Atlanta are drinking for pennies a glass while we're paying a buck twenty-nine for 12 ounces of the stuff. Not only that, but because 60 to 70% of bottled water escapes FDA or any other kind of regulation due to legal loop holes and understaffed state governments, bottled water is a prime candidate for contamination. And of course there are the environmental impacts of this so-called special water. Not only do big companies want to come in and pump exorbitant amounts of water from local water supplies thus endangering delicate eco-systems such as the ones we enjoy here in Northern Michigan, but the plastic bottles in which the water is packaged are made from fossil fuels and the shipping of the water uses up a good deal of resources too.<sup>2</sup> Many Americans have been sold a bill of goods when it comes to the supposed specialness of bottled water when in truth, for most of us, the best water was there all the time, right behind the handle of the kitchen sink—water that is regulated, purified, safe—water that is life giving.

In places where the water tables drop, lakes evaporate, and streams dry up—water is a precious commodity. The town of Sychar in the country of Samaria was one such place. Women there met at the well every morning—some walking from many miles away—in order to gather water for their family's use during the day. But one woman did not come early in the morning—she was not welcome among the other moms at the bus stop. She was an outcast and as such, had to come to gather water from the well in the middle of the day—when the sun beat down on her tired back and warmed the water in her jug before she'd even had a chance to take a drink of it. Now you can imagine her excitement when a stranger at the well mentions to her that there is a spring of living water. Such water would be special—preferable to the stagnant old water from the well . . . it would be living water . . . fresh, cool water . . . special water. And so she says to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” She desires the convenience of the bottled water vending machine with its lovely picture of water bubbling in a blue green stream down the side of a mountain. But instead of telling her where to find the stream he tells her to go get her husband. To which she replies, “I have no husband.” And crazy thing is he already knows that. “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.” Now when he says this she calls him a prophet because he knows about her collection of former lovers and he goes on to explain that there is a time that is coming and indeed has now come when the true worshipers will worship the God in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers God seeks. God is spirit, and God's worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” To which she replies, “I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” Then Jesus declared to her, right there as the mid day sun beat down upon their backs and brought beads of sweat to their brows, there it was that Jesus declared to a Samaritan woman—a woman of an opposing culture, a woman from the wrong side of the tracks, a woman who wasn't even fit to be around other Samaritan women, let alone to be spoken to by the son of God, the Messiah, it is to her that Jesus declares, “I who speak to you am he.” And as the disciples arrive on the scene and find their Jewish teacher talking to an outcast Samaritan woman, they watch as the woman turns and strides quickly away from the well, leaving her water jug behind. And when she arrives in the town where she is the subject of all of the juiciest gossip at the edge of the soccer field and raunchiest jokes in the office break rooms, she says to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” And so the women walked away from their ovens filled with bread and the men put down their hammers and the farmers came out of the fields and thus began the procession to the well. The procession to meet the Christ. A procession led by the least among them, the most unlikely of champions. And yet they believed her. And what could explain the turn around in that town, that the ones who had mocked and scorned her would now follow her, what can explain that kind of transformation but that she had sipped of the special water, the waters of eternal life, that flow freely from Christ?

Meanwhile, back at the well, the disciples express their concern about their teacher's welfare and urge him to eat. I imagine they're like Mrs. Claus talking to Santa Claus on the timeless claymation movie, Rudolph the Red Nose

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<sup>2</sup> Jemmott, 124-125.

Reindeer. “Eat, eat. No one wants a skinny Messiah.” And he responds, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.” The disciples wonder if he rode his donkey through McDonald’s or picked up a Power Bar at the 7/11 to tide him over. But just as he wasn’t talking about the convenience of bottled water to the Samaritan woman, so too is he not talking about fast food to the disciples. “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of God who sent me and to finish God’s work.”

And so to both the outsiders—the Samaritans and their unlikely five-time married heroine who Jesus met at the well, and to the insiders, those with whom he was most intimate, the disciples, Jesus sets out his agenda—his mission to the world. He is here to save all, to share the waters of eternal life that never run dry. But boy do they all have a hard time hearing him—not because of the gusty dry winds of the Samaritan countryside, but because of the constant and deafening din of their daily lives, the din that tells them they better drink when there’s water, eat when there’s food, win when there’s competition, hoard when there’s extra, take when it’s available, steal if you have to, buy because it’s convenient, do whatever you want because you can. And into that noisy din of ignorance and apathy and greed and want—Jesus sits down next to a woman from the wrong side of the tracks and offers her a refreshing drink of the life giving waters of God’s grace.

And because she drinks of it—because she stays and listens, questions and clarifies, doubts and finally believes, she becomes an agent of grace—when she becomes, as Martin Luther describes the proclamation of the gospel—“One beggar telling another beggar where to find food.” In her haste to tell the story of the Good News of Jesus’ living water she ironically leaves her water jug behind and hurries back to her village to tell folks about her experience with the living Christ. The living water of God’s grace that flowed from Christ flowed into her and from her these special waters flowed to the Samaritans in Sychar. She became an aqueduct and carried the good news to thirsty people.

The Samaritan woman became an evangelist. In churches such as ours evangelism is often thought of as the “E” word. We have a general attitude of live and let live and we don’t want to push our beliefs on others. Indeed, we’re put off by dinner party guests or extended family members who repeatedly talk about “getting saved” or being “born again.” Their dire warnings of the flames of hell fall on our deaf ears and their attempts to save our soul—or the souls of others—make us want to have less to do with church, not more. And because of our experiences of these so-called evangelists, we keep our mouths shut when it comes to our faith. We don’t tell others about the living water we’ve found.

And yet, if we go to a new restaurant and really enjoy the food or service—we don’t hesitate to tell our friends about it. In fact, a lot of the time we don’t just tell our friends about the restaurant, we take them there ourselves. The Samaritan woman found a good restaurant—she found the source of the eternal waters of God’s grace and not only did she tell her neighbors about him, she took them there to see him and hear him for themselves. This is evangelism—one beggar telling another beggar where to find food. One retired guy telling another retired guy at Rotary about Men’s Breakfast. One knitter telling another knitter at their knitting circle about writing down how she was a blessing during church last week. One mom telling another mom while they’re watching a soccer game about a Sunday School program where her child is loved unconditionally. One singer telling another singer at community choir practice about how the words of last Sunday’s anthem really spoke to his heart. One business person telling another business person over lunch at Amical about how good it felt to volunteer at the Goodwill Inn. One child telling another child during recess that she sang in church last week. That my friends is evangelism. It’s not selling someone a shiny, attractive bottle of water that promises the refreshment of mountain streams when really only delivering high-priced tap water. It’s not telling someone else what to believe, but showing someone else how your life has been transformed by the living waters of God’s grace. It’s offering them the opportunity to drink from the tap you’ve found—the tap from which runs the life-giving waters of God’s grace.

