

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector  
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,  
Lent 3 (27 February 2005):  
Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42*

## **Come to the Well**

He was in "enemy" territory, and worse: He was alone. Jesus had traveled beyond the tribal confines of his native Judah and into the alien territory of the Samaritans. While it was all technically Israel and while Jews and Samaritans were related by blood, history, and faith; the fact was that they hated one another, with the southern Jews viewing the northern Samaritans as mongrels, both ethnically and spiritually.

Nonetheless, Jesus and the disciples had come to the Samaritan city of Sychar. It had been a hot and dusty trek, and Jesus was wearied from the journey. As the disciples branched-out into the city to find supplies, Jesus headed for Jacob's well at the center of town. It was noon, and the sun was hot and high in the sky. Jesus perched his tired body on the lip of the well and then noticed a Samaritan woman striding toward the fount with an empty water jug balanced on her head. Fetching water was an ordinary enough task for a woman; but the mundane nature of this chore could not hide an element of strangeness that surrounded her approach.

Why would a woman come to the well to draw water at noon, in the heat of the day? Why risk the danger of being alone, out in public, when she could join the safe and social company of the other city women for such chores? And why wouldn't she fetch her water first thing in the morning so that the day's needs might be efficiently met at home? The answers did not require a detective to figure out.

Not daring to look up as she walked, the woman approached the well, painfully aware of Jesus' presence. An unattached man, in the center of the city, hanging out in broad daylight: she braced herself for what she expected to happen next. And sure enough, almost as if on cue, the unknown man at the well spoke to her. "Give me a drink." That was all he said, but she fully expected that there would be other words to follow that would convey other desires.

She was not an innocent – far from it! She knew the ways of the world; she also knew the ways of men and what options women had with them. She knew intimately how women's options were clear cut and virtually unequivocal. They could marry; they could beg – or worse. And the truth was that (in one way or another) this Samaritan woman was well-versed in all three options and well-versed also in the bitter pain of all three.

But she also knew the game, and she could play it well. So, without raising her eyes, she lowered her water jug from her head's perch and decided to call the man's bluff.

"Tell me, what kind of man are you to ask an unknown woman for a drink in a public place? Besides which, I can tell by your appearance that you are a Jew, and your people don't mix with my people. What's your angle, mister? Don't mess with me. It's already been a long day, and I still have chores to do."

An unnerving silence followed her quip. The strange man neither said anything nor made a move. He simply sat there, to the extent that she risked catching his gaze in order to see what would happen next. Finally, he spoke. "If you knew who it was that was asking you for a drink, you would have asked him for water and he would have given you water that will quench your deepest thirst."

"Original," she thought. "Give him credit for originality." It wasn't your usual line, to be sure. And despite the fact that he offered the woman special water but had nothing to draw it with (typical male!), she still wondered what the deal with 'living water' was about? Whatever it was, she would sure like to find some of it. Maybe, then, she wouldn't have to come to this well and work so hard day after day.

"All right," she thought to herself, "I'll bite. Let's play hardball. 'Sir, give me some of this water, please. I need it.'"

And that's the point, without notice, that it all got personal. Almost as if this mystery man wanted to revert to a proper formality, he told the woman to go and get her husband and for the two of them to return to him at the well. Then he would give what he had to offer.

At one level, the woman understood his point. Whatever it actually was, the water that brings eternal life was no casual thing; nor was it a private thing. It was not something to be hidden or hoarded. It was not some secret affair that she and this man would surreptitiously share alone. OK: What began looking like an attempt to hook-up now clearly is something quite different. But what?

"Go, call your husband, and come here."

It was a moment of truth. It was a moment of frightful discernment. The man's words hung in the air between them, as if frozen in place, awaiting the woman's response to determine which way this whole thing would go. And the look on Jesus' face indicated that he was also aware of this. Without a doubt, the ball was in her court. It was, indeed, getting personal.

"I can end this all now," she mused. "I can easily keep this conversation at a containable level, thank him very kindly for his time, and then run – literally and figuratively – to dodge the bullet." She was, after all, an expert at that! "Nothing need change. I can return unscathed to what I know, to my life. At least there I know what to expect, even if it's painful, boring, and deadening."

"But I could also do what I have never done before. I can dare to be my true self and allow this encounter to go deeper – beyond the surface appearances, beyond the well-honed exchange of batting eyes and forced blushes. But am I willing to take the risk – the risk of going beyond the "coffee hour chatter" and allow myself – for once – to be present?"

"Who am I kidding? After all these years of allowing myself to be made in the image of others, what makes me think that I'd even recognize my true self, if I could see me?"

"I have no husband."

To her it sounded as if someone else had spoken, but she could not help but recognize her own voice as the speaker. "Oh God, what's happening?" But before she had a chance to answer her own question, the man responded – knowingly, truthfully, and (most astonishingly) in a helpful and personal way. Somehow, the woman's failed past was named, but not as an indictment of her worthlessness but as a barrier that could be opened to lead to hope and redemption.

The man spoke the truth to her, not something she was used to hearing, especially from men. Moreover, he spoke her truth to her. Yes, this had gotten very personal, but the funny thing about it was that, unfamiliar with such an experience as she was, she had never felt so free before – or hopeful.

She had heard others speaking about how God is mysterious and how surprising the presence of holiness can be. She recalled with a vague sense that God and holiness often come in unexpected packages and through the most unlikely situations and people. "Sir," she blurted out, "I perceive that you are a prophet." And with that she began to babble the tid-bits of what she remembered of her foggy religious education, specifically how her Samaritan ancestors bid her people to worship near-by on Mount Gerizim and how this man's people worship in Jerusalem.

The conflict that religion always seems to breed had always confused her but also provided her with an easy excuse to ignore her spiritual commitments and obligations. Yet, if this man, with his obvious spiritual wisdom, would just help her, she would gladly get back to church and be a good girl.

"That's not what worship is for. That's not what the spiritual life is about." The calmness with which the man said this took away the sting of her lack of knowledge. "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father ... Yes, you can bet on it and take it from me: The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. And when people take the risk of being in Communion – of being "in spirit" -- and when they take the responsibility of being present – "in truth" -- and no longer playing games with themselves and with God, then look out! It will no longer be about whether you like the hymns or understand the sermon."

Again, she grasped at the fragments of the catechism that even she was surprised to realize still remained in her memory after decades of neglect. "Yes," she said breathlessly, "I know that the Messiah will come, and when he does, everything will be clear. But, please, sir, do you happen to know who he is?"

She asked this last question of him, both fearful of what he would say and yet riveted with needful expectation. But even in her wildest fantasies, she did not expect to hear this: "I who speak to you am he."

At that moment, she couldn't tell if it was thunder exploding or her heart and life being released. In a sense it didn't matter. It didn't matter because when the man said what he said, it was as if she suddenly stepped through the invisible barrier she had known all her life and into something new, something freeing, something alive. And without further thought, she knew precisely that it was not thunder. It was the sound of the release of her life.

*O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you,  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a barren and dry land  
where there is no water.*

This opening line of Psalm 63 also speaks to the great thirst we all have, this need for the “living water” of God’s Christ. It is water that the Samaritan woman found in her encounter with Jesus. She wasn’t looking for it, and a big part of her didn’t really want it because ... because it was too personal, too close to the bone, too threatening an insight of who she was and what she could be. But with courage she never knew she possessed, she chose to break through – to break through all that fearfully kept her bound up, and dared to quench that thirst.

We never hear about this woman again, save what John tells us in the closing lines of this morning’s gospel: namely, that her own witness caused others to come personally and honestly to Jesus to taste the water of eternal life. I wonder whatever happened to her?

Here’s a poem that in one way or another might be seen as her answer to us. At any rate, I think it’s helpful not only with regard to our wondering about the woman but also how much we have in common with her.

*Jesus, I come into the warmth of your presence  
knowing that you are  
the very emptiness of God.  
I come before you  
holding the water jar of my life.  
Your eyes meet mine  
and I know what I’d rather not know.*

*I came to be filled,  
But I am already full.  
I am too full  
This is my sickness  
I am full of things  
that crowd out  
your healing presence.  
A holy knowing steals inside my heart  
And I see the painful truth.  
I don’t need more  
I need less  
I am too full.*

*I am full of things that block out  
your golden grace.  
I am smothered by gods of my own creation  
I am lost in the forest of my false self  
I am full of my own opinions and narrow attitudes*

*Full of fear, resentments, control  
Full of self-pity, and arrogance.  
Slowly this terrible truth  
Pierces my heart  
I am so full there is no room for you.*

*Contemplatively and with compassion  
You ask me to reach into my water jar.  
One by one, Jesus, you enable me  
To lift out the things  
that are a hindrance to my wholeness.  
I take each one to my heart and  
I hear you asking me,  
"Why is this so important to you?"*

*Like a murmur of a gentle stream  
I hear you calling,  
Let go, let go, let go!  
I pray with each obstacle  
Tasting the bitterness and grief  
It has caused me.*

*Finally...  
I sit with my empty water jar  
I hear you whisper,  
You have become a space for God  
Now there is hope  
Now you are ready to be a channel of life.  
You have given up your agenda  
There is nothing left but God.<sup>[1]</sup>*

Come to the well. Amen.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Macrina Wiederkehr, Seasons of the Heart