

Grace and peace to you, dear friends, through Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God. Amen

Whew. This is a long one—I understand now why Pastor John was so willing to pass this text onto me. And thank you for that.

But it's not just a coincidence that it's a long scripture text. This exchange between Jesus and the Woman at the Well is the longest recorded conversation in the New Testament!

And that sort of surprised me. I'd never given it much thought, but I guess I assumed that the longest conversation would be between Jesus and one of the 12 disciples, or maybe, an important public figure of some kind. So, I have to wonder why it's this woman that Jesus chooses to share such a long and powerful message.

Here's what we know: She's a woman, the Bible doesn't give her a name, but we do know that she's a Samaritan, and we'll come to discover in the text that she's unmarried. As a comparison last week we read about Nicodemus: a powerful man, a Pharisee of high status, and a Jew. The interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan Woman is twice as long as Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus even though by most standards Nicodemus is way more qualified.

I'm sure there's a lot of deep theological answers about why Jesus spends so much time talking to the Woman at the Well but I have a pretty simple explanation: Jesus was tired.

From the verses before we learn that Jesus was travelling from Judea to Galilee a distance of 70 miles and stopped in the Samaritan city called Sychar because he was "tired out by his journey". Jesus was tuckered out and he was thirsty. Of course he's happy to hang out at a well.

I know, I know, I'm paying for all this Seminary training and my great conclusion is that Jesus is TIRED? Well, I think it's a good starting point. Jesus, Son of God, took on flesh and became a human. A living breathing human whose body felt thirst and hunger, who's body would know pain and suffering. A body that could work miracles and walk amongst all people on earth. It's no accident that God took on flesh and it's no accident that this interaction takes place, at a well with a woman from Samaria.

When Jesus speaks to the woman at the well she questions, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” and then in a parenthetical aside scripture reads (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans). I’ve heard this referred to as the understatement of the century. We know from other scripture texts about the hostility between the Samaritans and the Jewish people.

Some might compare it to the hatred between two opposing sports teams. But it’s more of a sibling rivalry. At one point, the Jews and the Samaritans were of the same Northern Tribe. But got separated in exile. The Samaritans would build their temple on Mount Gerizim while the Jewish people rebuilt their temple in Jerusalem. They share the same God, but their Gods have different homes. Which sounds like a smaller deal than it really was. A Jewish man would not speak to a Samaritan woman; to drink from her water jar would require him to return to the Temple for a ritual cleansing.

For Jesus to sit down and speak to the woman at the well is nothing less than radical. Jesus is breaking down the social barriers that would preclude him from interacting with this woman. There’s an interdependence here in Jesus’ word play of water and living water. In a physical way Jesus depends on this woman: he is thirsty and he has nothing to draw water from the well with. But the woman in her marginalized position and low status is spiritually thirsting.

In verse 13 Jesus 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.”

She thirsts not only for the living water that Jesus offers but the chance to not have to keep coming back to the well to draw water. Her daily chore of collecting water at the well is a continual reminder of her isolation. We know that this story takes place at noon, the hottest part of the day. It’s likely that she chooses to go to the well then rather than in the cooler morning or evening to avoid the shunning of the other women in her community.

Oftentimes this story has become less about the living water that Jesus offers and more about a “shady woman” who has had 5 husbands and now lives with a man who’s not her husband. We’ve internalized the prejudice that the woman’s community exhibits and read this scripture through their bias. We refer to her as ‘loose’, or as ‘a woman of the night’, we say that “she’s easy” and we might even say that “she was asking for it”-- whatever troubles those are.

We’ve taken a story about Jesus breaking down social barriers and made it into a cautionary tale of what happens to loose women. What we know from the scripture is that the woman has had 5 husbands and the man she lives with now is not her husband. Women during Jesus’ time had no social standing of their own. She needs a husband to have security; that she was married 5 times seems to be evidence of circumstances completely beyond her control. No woman would choose this.

It could be that the woman had been divorced for trivial matters, but it’s more likely that she was divorced because she was barren—she wasn’t able to produce an heir to the family and so she, as a woman, had no value. As for the man she lives with, because of the vulnerable position of widows there was a law in ancient Israel that the brother of the dead man must take in the widow either through marriage or living arrangements. She isn’t ‘shacking up’ with another man but surviving in the only way possible for a woman at that time.

For hundreds of years Bible commentators and theologians (mostly men) have condemned this woman for the single fact of her marital history which in all likelihood was completely beyond her control. It’s tempting for us all to say that this wrongful condemnation is a part of the past; to say that we’ve moved past it as a society. But I invite us to look around at the social movements like #metoo, or Time’s Up, or read the newspaper articles about the 156 women who spoke up against the abuses of Larry Nassar in the gymnastics and sports community and finally had their day in court.

As a society we have turned a woman’s body against her and when she speaks up we have condemned her. We have knowingly and unknowingly all been complicit in actions that contribute to violence against women. On a micro level, we take a single story about a woman and make it her defining characteristic.

Verse 28 says “The woman left her water jar and went back to the city saying “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!”. Her testimony rejoices in being known and seen fully by Jesus because she is more than her 5 husbands, her divorces, her barren womb, or her status as widow. Jesus speaks to the woman at the well not *in spite* of her past history but *because* he knows her beyond that single story. It says that the woman leaves her water jar at the well. She has been filled to overflowing and goes on to testify to her community about the wonders of Jesus the Messiah.

How might we today put down our water jars? To leave behind the burdens of shame, and ‘not good enough’ and questions of “am I worthy”. Beyond our gender, race, ethnicity, class, or citizenship status Jesus has come and is with us promising eternal life so that we may be fully known and never thirst again not in spite of our history but because Jesus knows us wholly as Children of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.