

**Sunday, March 3, 2024**  
**Psalm 63:1-8; John 4:5-42**  
**"The Secrets We Keep"**  
**The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching**

Several summers ago, a father and his son were out for a walk in a farmer's field in northern England. The son had brought a metal detector with him, and all of the sudden, it started to squeal. They decided to dig up whatever was buried, and what they brought out of the ground was a metal bowl, that turned out to be over 1,000 years old, buried by Vikings, and it was filled with over 600 gold and silver coins! They thought they were just out for a normal afternoon walk, maybe uncover a quarter or two – but they ended up finding a huge treasure that day! True story.

Our "story" for today is very similar. It is the tale of a woman who went out on a normal day's activity – to gather water from the well — and yet she discovered more than she ever expected. More than just some silver and gold coins, this woman found the water of life, eternal life.

Some of you may not remember a time when women had no voice, especially in the pulpit, or when women had no vote, or way back when women had no real place in society; even though we know of places in our world where this still rings true. I do remember being among the minority of women who attended Seminary when I did, sometimes the only woman in a class full of men, and I do remember while living in the south years ago, not welcome to preach in any local congregation, only permitted to lead a "women's support group for young mothers". But I always took pride in the fact that while society was slow to change, and the church sometimes even slower, Jesus was all about change. In fact, some call him the very first feminist. He not only included women at his table or in his conversation, he encouraged them to be witnesses, missionaries, evangelists. And in today's story, Jesus speaks with this woman at the well for a longer period of time, than anyone else in all of the gospels.

Now at first appearance, this seems to be an innocent encounter, Jesus decides to cut through Samaria, and at the heat of the day, having sent his disciples off to get some food, he sits down next to Jacob's well. Dying of thirst, he realizes he doesn't even have a cup to draw water. Along comes a woman with a vessel and before she can begin to retrieve her water, Jesus asks her to give him some. Sounds like nothing, right? Well, let me start by saying this entire encounter with Jesus and the woman, was completely and utterly absurd, absurd! And yet - yet very well planned.

Some say there are three reasons why this encounter was simply absurd. First, she was a woman. At that time, women were not even allowed to even worship with men - - men whose morning devotions included the prayer, 'thank God I am not a woman.' [no joke]. They were not to be seen or heard, especially not by holy men, who did not even speak to their own wives in public! But Jesus does.

Second, she was a Samaritan. Now the Samaritans focused their faith on the Patriarchs, centered worship on Mount Gerizim, where Jacob's well was located, and looked for the Messiah to be a prophet like Moses. The Jews on the other hand had a broadened tradition including all the prophets, centered their worship around Jerusalem and were looking for a

Messiah in the line of King David. Jews and Samaritans carried a deep-seated aversion to each other. Jews considered Samaritans to be half-breed sellouts to paganism and Samaritans abhorred what they perceived as Jewish arrogance and their claim to have the true temple of God. So Jesus traveling through Samaria and even speaking to a Samaritan is both crazy and absurd but also necessary if his message was for everyone.

Now many have said there is a third reason why this encounter is absurd and that is because she was a fallen woman, a loose woman. Respectable women made their trips to the well in the morning, where they could greet one another and talk about the news of the village, share some water, the latest gossip. But this woman came in the afternoon, so many assume she was one of the people they talked about in the morning. Maybe. But let's be clear, we really don't know if she is a fallen woman, a loose woman. Jesus at no point invites repentance or, for that matter, speaks of sin at all. She very easily could have been widowed or have been abandoned or divorced. Five times would be heartbreaking, but not impossible. Further, she could now be living with someone that she was dependent on or be in what's called a Levirate marriage (where a childless woman lives with her deceased husband's brother). More on this in a minute.

So, imagine her surprise when she comes in the heat of the day . . . and sees a strange man sitting beside the well. He could be anyone, but when he lifts his head and asks her for a drink, she sees the olive skin, the dark eyes, the strong nose. This man is a Jew, so what in the world is he doing there? Why in the world is he even speaking to her? So, they talk about it, and while it is never clear whether they are on the same page, the woman understands that she wants what Jesus is offering her.

So, let me ask you this, when have you encountered someone, someone who had a powerful impact on you, moving you, teaching you, challenging you? Think about this for a moment. A couple people come to my mind. The woman Prue, I spoke about a few weeks ago, definitely. It's in those relationships that our world opens, and we actually move closer to God. Because for Jesus it wasn't about the miracles, the "wow" moments. It was about bringing someone into a deeper relationship. We all need people in our lives, we need neighbors who care for one another, a church community who checks in with each other, we need relationships and what many call, holy encounters.

The first part of this encounter of Jesus and the woman at the well, is about water. For those of you who recall the story of Nicodemus, just like when he misunderstands Jesus' description of rebirth, taking him literally; likewise, this woman at first misunderstands, thinking Jesus is referring to water from the well. The word used here for "living water" also means flowing water and so it is understandable that she confuses it for running water and asks how he will give her this running water, without a bucket. But unlike Nicodemus, who doesn't seem to move beyond his confusion, this woman does move, because she realizes she wants some of this unusual water Jesus is speaking about, realizing that it is not ordinary water but not quite yet understanding in what way it is different. So, she hangs in there, in conversation - listening, questioning, curious, hopeful.

Here we learn that both regular water and living water are basic sources of life, both are equally important in quenching one's thirst. One is physical, whether you are rich or poor or somewhere in between, everyone needs water. But we also need this holy water, the living water given to us from God, water of the spirit which flows through us, which quenches our

thirst for meaning and purpose, filling that hole in our lives. What does the Psalmist write?  
"My soul thirsts for you, O God."

So, the next question for us today is, what is it that you thirst for? Do you thirst for meaning and purpose in your life? And what does that look like for you? Do you thirst for wholeness and healing? Do you thirst for direction and answers? And how far will you go to find that? I don't know about you but right now in my life, I sometimes thirst for meaning and purpose and have a hard time seeing it. I sometimes thirst for wholeness and healing and don't always see that either. And direction and answers? Forget it! But what we learn from Jesus and his encounters with people like this woman, is that we must simply be open to our own encounter. An encounter which can show us Christ's presence within us today, that living spirit, living water. And sometimes this means stepping outside, way outside of our comfort zone.

My husband and I before moving to beautiful Lyme, CT over ten years ago, raised our children in New Canaan, CT, Fairfield County. Quite a different environment. One day my daughter turned to me and said, I want to go to Africa and teach children. No, she didn't say I want to go, she said, I need to go. The mission trips she took through the church to help people in places in this country weren't enough for her. So, she spent time teaching children in Uganda. Talk about out of her comfort zone! Forget the simple food, rice and beans, rice and beans; forget the shelter of mosquito netting and diseases – real diseases! – and lack of facilities if you know what I mean, there was the danger too, real danger. And yet, the encounters she had with the children she taught and the people who cared for them, changed her life forever. Way too far out of my comfort zone, and maybe yours, but it's about being open to encountering others, learning from others in a new way.

There are many times when I am sitting at the hospital bedside of a church member, and I know I don't have the power to heal or provide answers or give directions or even instill confidence. But I can read scripture, I can pray, and believe that God is working through me as God does through all of us. And I can't tell you how often I walk away feeling like I did nothing, but that person I visited, taught me so much about the love of God in my life!

There are moments, even in these little encounters, that we begin to realize that meaning and purpose come to us through just being present. We learn healing and wholeness doesn't always mean freedom from pain and suffering, it is healing of a different kind which does come through strength, hope and acceptance. And direction and answers never appear to us in a straight path or perfectly understandable way, but it does come in many different forms through our faith, perseverance and openness to the spirit.

And now we move into the second part of the story, the private life of this woman. Can you imagine meeting a person who knows everything about your past? Everything! But remember, this story is not about immorality; it's about identity. Jesus invites her to not be defined by her circumstances, even if they are improper, and offers her an identity that lifts her above her tragedy. As one preacher writes, If you believe the worst of her, saying "I see that you are a prophet" could be nothing more than a clumsy attempt to change the topic. But if you can imagine another scenario, things look different. "Seeing" in the Gospel of John, is all-important. When the woman says, "I see you are a prophet," she is making a confession of faith. Why? Because Jesus has "seen" her. He has seen her plight — of dependence, not immorality. He has recognized her, spoken with her, offered her something of incomparable worth. He has *seen*

her — she exists for him, has worth, value, and significance. And so, when he speaks of her past both knowingly and compassionately, she realizes she is in the presence of a prophet. (1)

I know that the Messiah is coming -- I am he. By confirming her true identity, he reveals his own, and that is how it still happens. As one pastor writes, "the Messiah is the one in whose presence you know who you really are -- the good and bad of it, the all of it, the hope in it. The Messiah is the one who shows you who you are by showing you who he is -- who crosses all boundaries, breaks all rules, drops all disguises -- speaking to you like someone you have known all your life, bubbling up in your life like a well that needs no dipper, so that you go back to face people you thought you could never face again. Speaking to them as boldly as he spoke to you. 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done.'" (2) And there is that phrase again, you know, the one I told all of you to use to grow the church, "come and see".

When the woman at the well realizes that this man who knows everything about her is a prophet, she becomes a witness. She doesn't even fully believe it all, she doesn't know what to say or do, she just opens up a word of hope -- "I don't know who he is but he knew everything about me and speaks about water welling up into eternal life and you need to come and check out this guy". Come and see. Isn't that the witness we all have? We too are broken, don't really know the right words to say or things to do, to live each day as Christ's disciples, but that is just how it is meant to be. Jesus reveals his true identity not to the Jewish leaders or even to the disciples but to a religious, social, political outsider. Like this woman, all we need to do is serve when and where we can, say what we believe, live what we believe, not apologizing for what we know and do not know, and let God work through us to move people to hope, promise and love.

In the last part of this story Jesus speaks about the true meaning of worshipping God. Remember the hard-standing rule was the Samaritans were pagans and the Jews were the only ones who had it right, worshipping only in the proper place, in the Temple. Jesus came to say, worship doesn't need a beautiful temple or a beautiful church (we found that out in the past few years). And worship isn't even about the best preachers (thank God for that!). Jesus said worship isn't even tied to a Samaritan place or a Jewish place, true worship is about two things, Spirit and truth. True worship is led by the Spirit of God that Jesus gives as living water. And that can take place anytime, anywhere, anyplace.

This encounter, this story, in many ways, is a lot like our own story. We too are broken at times, sometimes lost, without hope, full of doubt. And yet, like this woman, we know we must never give up looking for that living water, we must come to the well to find refreshment for our souls searching, for that holy encounter where we will be seen and known and loved. In the name of the who loves us, journeys with us, and satisfies our every thirst, the Savior of the entire World. Amen.

(1) Lose, the Rev. David. *Misogyny, moralism and the woman at the well*. 2017.

(2) Taylor, Barbara Brown, *The Christian Century*, 2/12/2008.