

**First United Methodist Church  
618 Eighth Street  
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“Seeking: Will You Give Me a Drink?”  
Text: John 4-42

This morning’s reading is a very deep and inspiring text that really needs multiple weeks to unpack all that is going on. So, let’s jump right in.

Today’s reading is most often known as the story of the woman at the well. Sadly, like many of the stories about women in the Bible, her name is never given. While we know prominent women like Mary and Elizabeth and Mary Magdalene, this woman is simply known for the place where this important encounter took place. Her name and much of her circumstances are wrapped in mystery.

The story begins with tensions in Judea, the southern portion of Israel. Jesus and his disciples have decided to leave and go north to Galilee. Between these two regions was the land of the Samaritans. Because of this journey, the scriptures say that Jesus “had to go through Samaria.” I don’t want to cast undue doubts upon this reading, but technically this is not true.

At the time of Jesus, there was a long-standing hatred between Jews and Samaritans. It is said that when Samaritans would speak the word Jew, they would often spit afterward to show their disgust. And Jews hated Samaritans so much that when they needed to travel between Galilee and Judea, they would take a long route around the region rather than step foot on Samaritan soil. To put that into a modern context, it would be like Hoosiers having such disdain for Kentucky that when you wanted to go to Florida, you would travel far east or west, before going southward so as to avoid ever stepping foot in Kentucky. That was the level of hatred Jews had for Samaritans.

So, to say that Jesus had to go to Samaria isn’t completely accurate. He could have done like others and taken the longer route. Unless. Unless the reason he had to go was not about geography and perhaps about something more important. He had to go because his ministry was about breaking down barriers of hatred. He had to go because this was the most noteworthy way he could teach love for one another.

Jesus and his disciples arrived in the early afternoon, in the heat of the day. They were likely tired and thirsty. The well was there; water was available. But they didn’t have a bucket with which to draw the water. I may be reading too much into this, but I can imagine them arriving there and asking, “Did anyone bring a bucket?” Everyone’s thirsty, but no one thought to travel with the necessary tool to draw water from the well.

So, Jesus waited there, thirsty. A Samaritan woman arrives to draw water. She has a cup. Jesus begins their conversation by asking her for something to drink. It makes sense to us. But the request is complicated on several different levels.

First of all, unaccompanied men and women would not typically talk to one another. Jesus has broken the social rules by engaging this woman in conversation. Innocent as his request may seem, he has broken the social norms to initiate this conversation.

Secondly, as the woman indicates, in order for her to give Jesus something to drink, he would have to drink from her cup. The Samaritan woman knows this is contrary to Jewish law. A faithful Jew would never share utensils with a Gentile. It was unclean to do so. For Jesus to drink from this woman's cup would make him unclean. Within the span of one sentence, Jesus has broken two social customs by speaking to a woman he does not know and asking to drink from her cup.

With the barriers broken down, Jesus and this Samaritan woman engage in an important conversation that has been deeply misunderstood. They talk about thirst, an appropriate topic when standing alongside a well. But the thirst is more than the physical desire for water. The well becomes a metaphor for talking about the deeper thirsts of life...the longings, the needs, the hopes. It is about things that we cannot live without...love, hope, acceptance, peace. The two will speak about the deeper thirsts we all experience.

Commentaries have drawn a lot of conclusions through reading between the lines of their conversation. For one thing, commentaries have noted that the woman came to the well in the heat of the day. Most women came to the well in the early morning, when it was cooler. The well was the place to socialize, the modern version of the water cooler. You would check in on your neighbors, find out how folks were doing. The well was the place where women could talk freely and where friendships were forged.

The fact that this woman came alone, when no one else would likely be there likely indicates that she is isolated from the others in her community. She may have been alone, ostracized from the others in the community. Rather than face their condemnation or judgments or criticisms, she chose to come at a time no one else would be there. Imagine her surprise then, to see Jesus there.

Commentaries have also made a lot about the details of their conversation. Jesus asks her about her husband and she responds that she doesn't have one. Jesus applauds her honesty and says that she has had five husbands and the one she is with now is not her husband. It is important to recognize that Jesus is not speaking literally here. He is not really asking her about her homelife. He is inquiring about her faith. Throughout Samaria, they worshiped several different gods. How tiring it must have been to have to please so many gods. Sacrificing here and there, appealing to different deities, always worried whether you have done enough. It was a burden.

So often this conversation has been interpreted to suggest loose morals on the part of the woman. That is not what this is about. This is not a conversation between Jesus and a sinful woman. It is a conversation between two thirsty people pointing one another to where they can find a cold drink of water. The woman is not being judged. She is having a burden lifted from her.

This is the point at which the disciples return to the well. And they are immediately uncomfortable with what they find. There is Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman. Jesus may not be judging her, but I can't say the same for the disciples. They seem to want to pull Jesus aside and remind him that he isn't supposed to be speaking to this woman. He seems to have forgotten the social norms and they are ready to correct him. But, before they can do so, the woman departs.

The woman returns to the city to tell everyone about the teacher who has come to the well. She wants them to know the goodness that she has experienced. She wants them to know the joy that is in her heart. She wants them to know the love that has filled her heart. She invites them to come to the well and meet this man.

But there is one more detail to this story. When the woman left the well, she left her water jar behind. Again, commentaries have made much of this little detail. Some have suggested that the woman was so excited by the conversation with Jesus that she walked away having forgotten what brought her there in the first place.

Some have indicated that this is a sign of her break with her past. Leaving the water jar behind is a sign that she is starting life anew.

I agree that this feels like a new beginning for her. And she is indeed filled with great joy. But I am not convinced that either of these reasons are suitable to explain the water jar that remains there at the well.

When we view this as a conversation between two people with little in common, it is an unbalanced equation. One person is the giver and the other is the receiver. But this conversation is between two people with much in common. They know what it means to be excluded. Jesus has just left Judea because the religious leaders are angry at his work. This is a story about two people with needs. This is a story about two beloved children of God. When we make that our starting point, each one has something to share with the other.

Too often we focus this story on what the woman at the well receives. But that is where the water jar comes into play. She has something to offer. She has a gift to share as well. Jesus is thirsty. He had a need. I don't think the woman was forgetful. I don't think she was so overwhelmed with joy that she forgot something as precious as her water jar. I believe she left it there on purpose. Perhaps it was a gift of gratitude. Perhaps it was a way of recognizing that Jesus had a need that she could address. Either way, I don't think it was accidental that she left the water jar behind.

When we read this familiar story from that perspective, it isn't just about God providing for our needs. It is also about God inviting us to use our gifts. We all have something to share, a gift that brings comfort or care to those around us. This story reminds us that we are not empty vessels waiting to be filled. We are filled with gifts and talents to be shared. Although the woman at the well may have been excluded, told that she wasn't important, made to feel that she had nothing to offer, that was not the reality. What Jesus reminded her is that she had something

to offer. He was thirsty. He was in need. She provided a cold drink of water that quenched his thirst after a long journey.

Later in his ministry, Jesus would tell another story that ended with the saying, “whenever you have offered a cold drink of water to someone in need, you have done it to him.” I wonder at that moment whether he wasn’t remembering the Samaritan woman’s kindness. If he had that water jar in his satchel, I wonder if he touched it with a feeling of kindness remembered.

We may downplay the gifts that we have to offer. We may doubt that we have much to share. Someone may have even told you this. It’s not true. It is not how God views things. God values the gifts you have to share. They are important. They are significant. They are life changing. It is up to us to use those gifts and talents in ways that embrace, welcome, comfort and love one another. To do so is as refreshing as a cold drink of water on a hot summer day.

Jesus had to go to Samaria to break down the barriers. He had to go to Samaria to those who were excluded or undervalued, like the woman at the well. And he brought good news to them.

I don’t need to fully understand what the woman at the well was going through. Like so many people around us, she was going through some unknown struggle. It is likely true that everyone we meet is going through some unseen difficulty. The person sitting alongside you in the pew today is likely struggling in some way. That struggle may be very apparent or it may be completely hidden from view, known only to that person and God. It isn’t our nosiness or ability to be a good detective and figure out what their struggle that is needed. What this story invites from us is the ability to reach out in kindness, to respond to the needs that are seen and unseen and offer a bit of kindness and compassion. In a world of thirsty people, every day, each in their own way, we are being asked, “Will you give me something to drink?”