

Well, Well, Well...Now I See!

[Text - John 4:5-30, 39-42]

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This morning's New Testament reading provides us one of those detailed and symbolically rich narratives that are found throughout the Gospel of John. It's an old story about an ancient well, and some archaic social tensions and cultural concerns; yet it's a story that offers tremendous insight on some of today's most pressing issues and problems. In this story, Jesus has a noontime encounter with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. By that time of day, most respectable people from town would have already gotten their water - during the cooler morning hours. Noon is the ideal time for the "socially unacceptable" to take their turn at the well, and thus avoid the judgmental scrutiny of others. Yet on this particular day, this woman comes to the well only to find another person already sitting there. Fortunately, he's a stranger, who hopefully doesn't know her story; so maybe she can simply get her water in peace. But apparently this man's not the shy type, and he initiates a conversation with her, by asking for a drink of water. Since he has no vessel to draw the water himself, common courtesy requires that she respond.

From the man's accent and appearance, she realizes that he's Jewish, and possibly a rabbi; which probably makes her even more uneasy. But then again, he should be as uncomfortable as she - eager to get his water, and then get away from an 'unsavory, Samaritan'. Yet strangely enough, he seems quite comfortable with her, and in no hurry to leave. The mere fact that Jesus gives this woman his attention, catches her by surprise. She asks him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" [for as the Gospel writer editorially explains "the Jews have no dealings with Samaritans!"] Yet, apparently, Jesus isn't put-off by the fact that she's a Samaritan, or a woman, or that she's come to the well alone, during the noonday heat. He simply gives his full attention to the person in front of him - a child of the Holy One who he has the privilege of encountering. He then engages her in a deep conversation about water and *living* water, the history of Jacob's well and that deep inner thirsting that many people experience.

Realizing that Jesus actually sees her, and is willing to interact with her, the woman asks *him* for a drink - from that "fountain of living water". In response, Jesus gives her the opportunity to open-up further, saying, "Go call your husband and come back." The woman admits, "I have no husband," which Jesus apparently already knows. He says, "You've had *five* husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband!" [Well *that's* certainly awkward!] So the woman quickly changes the subject with a rather droll observation of her own: "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet!" And then she launches into a theological discourse about the proper place and the correct way to worship - a rather obvious ploy to shift the conversation. Yet Jesus doesn't seem to mind! He continues to give her his undivided attention; and by doing so, demonstrates a genuine acceptance of who she is and *where* she is in her life. No judgment; no words of condemnation; no pious withdrawing from this flawed, yet fascinating child of the Holy One.

Genuine respect and acceptance of other people and cultures may be one of the most important things that a person can bring to the table today; yet it can also be a difficult thing to do. This is particularly true

when we've had no meaningful interaction with others who are different from us, and we rely on false stereotypes that are created to propagate fear and hatred, suspicion and judgement. Yet Jesus clearly teaches that we should not judge others; and more significantly, Jesus himself doesn't judge. He is *truthful* with the Samaritan woman; yet he doesn't criticize her, or shame her. Instead, he affirms her as a genuine child of the Holy One - one who is worthy to receive that Living Water of Divine compassion and grace.

Throughout this encounter, Jesus demonstrates the tremendous importance of putting-aside our prejudicial assumptions, and paying attention to actual people. So rather than adding to this person's problems or negative self-image, Jesus lifts-up the marvelous possibilities that he sees in her. And he helps her to see herself as one who doesn't need to be trapped or defined by her history or heritage, gender or reputation. Instead, she can see herself as a valued member of God's wonderfully Inclusive Family. And thus begins a remarkable transformation: as this woman realizes that she truly *is* a child of the Holy One - one who can worship "in spirit and in truth" - one who can't wait to tell others about this extraordinary, Life-changing encounter.

She hurries back to the city, to joyfully invite others to 'come, and see this person who knows everything I've ever done.' ["Really, *everything*? Well, this should be juicy!"] So they eagerly follow her back to the well, where they also meet Jesus. "And many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony." How about that! Because of her marvelous encounter with Jesus, this woman's life is completely changed: from being the city's disreputable outcast, to becoming that community's first evangelist!

So...what might all this have to do with *our* community today? It reminds us that as a community of faith, you and I have the awesome opportunity to help change people's lives - to "open-up the faucet" [as it were] and allow that fountain of Living Water to spring-forth with new life and new possibilities. The best way for us to do this, is by faithfully following the example of Jesus Christ:

By paying attention to the people we encounter. By really seeing them for who they are, and listening to what they have to say.
By affirming them where they are - not judging their past, but welcoming their *presence*, and raising-up their potential.
By truly recognizing them as our sisters and brothers - as genuine children of our One Heavenly Parent.

One of the tremendous benefits that comes when we do these things, is that the more you and I look for the goodness and potential in others, the more that goodness and potential grows and develops in our own lives. That's the wonderful dynamic of this Life-changing process: that once it begins, the more it will spread and deepen, mature and multiply throughout our community, and throughout the world.

Like water itself, the "Living Water" which Jesus offers brings refreshment and renewal, hope and help to lives that are parched and perishing. And just as water always finds a way through even the smallest of cracks, so too this Living Water of Divine compassion and grace can work its way into the most minute opening of the hardest of hearts. And with patience and persistence, it will erode and wash-away the fear and anger, bitterness and hatred that we imagine to be impossible to remove. Yet as Jesus shows -time and again - the free-flowing power of Divine love, forgiveness, and grace truly is unstoppable!