

“Busted!”

A woman of Samaria came to draw water from a well, and Jesus said to her, basically, “May I have a drink, please?”

The most direct route north to Galilee was through the region of Samaria, yet the typical good Jew of Jesus’ day would often take the long way around just to *avoid* this area. The problem with Samaria was the people who lived there. They were not “good Jews.” They were not *pure* Jews by heredity; they were Jews who had been ethnically mixed over generations of inter-marriages with people of the Arab race. Folks in Samaria were not even faithfully practicing the Hebrew religion but were combining Judaism with vestiges of their earlier roots in *pagan* religions. Such religious practices made them ritually impure in the eyes of the “good” Jews of Jesus’ day, so when it came to religious matters it was best for a practicing Jew to just *avoid* them.

But here Jesus was, *talking* to a *woman*...and one who was, shall we say, “well acquainted” with *men*...*many* of them, if you know what I’m saying. Her life was filled with disappointment and regret, as her quest for someone to give her real life had failed. Her five marriages had likely all ended in divorce, since she is not referred to here as a *widow*, and her sixth attempt at romance was now but a live-in relationship without commitment; and, presumably, without the promise of the happiness she once sought. With marriage now but an unnecessary formality, in her opinion, she simply settled for “keeping house” with a man who *might* give her *temporary security*. Her life was a crock, but she would make the best of it and take what pleasure she could find wherever she could find it.

There are a number of telling signs about the emotional condition of the woman at the well, if you know what to look for. With the posture of a bitter woman she trudges off to the village well under the heat of the noonday sun to draw the day’s water supply. Others would have retrieved the day’s water in advance, either in the cool of the previous evening or at dawn. Why not her? Either she was highly disorganized and couldn’t get her act together and waited

until her last drop was depleted and she *had* to go, or...the stink-eye snubs of her neighbors, who knew “what kind of woman” she was, made going there when others were present too unpleasant an experience to bear. Such judgment, coming from those whose marriages were “successful” by religious and societal standards, would only inflame her already pained existence. It is unfortunate, isn’t it, that “good” people can be so *bad* and resentful of others who are desperate to find someone who will give real meaning to their life?

“Well, the hell with them,” this woman probably thought. Facing her *past* was burden *enough*, let alone having them dump on her *today*. She had so many wrongs to resent, so many disappointments to regret, and so many “what ifs” and missed opportunities to grieve over. And so, with the constant nagging of her own conscience, she would put on as bold a face as she could and go out there, carrying with her also her worries about tomorrow and what *it* might bring. Stumbling uncertainly through today, weighed down by yesterday, and worried about tomorrow...does she sound like anyone *you* know? Or perhaps there are times when you feel that way yourself....

If you had predicted for her that morning that she would soon become a shining star who would win her fellow townspeople over to a new way of life, she would likely have emitted a rueful, humorless laugh. Yet, that’s exactly what happened, as the stranger she met at the well helped her abandon her misguided quest for a meaningful life *that someone else could give her*, and simply *dare to live*.

It all began with this engaging stranger asking her for a drink, and her dismissive response: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” For two reasons she was taken aback that Jesus spoke to her: first, men did not publicly speak to women; and, second, she was a Samaritan. And, as I said, Jews customarily had no dealings with Samaritans. In short, they were considered “dogs” by Jews. If anyone had a good reason for an inferiority complex, it would be a Samaritan. Thus, Jesus had broken both a gender taboo and a racial taboo by even speaking to this woman.

Perhaps she thought he was *flirting* with her at first when he answered, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ *you* would have asked *him*, and he would have given *you living water*.”

How's that for a pick-up line, ladies? It sure beats, "Do you come here often?" and "What's your sign?" anyway....

So she played along and said, "Sir, *you* don't have a bucket to *dip* with (or you wouldn't have been asking *me* for some, buster!), and the well is deep. So where would you propose to *get* this so-called *living* water? Are you greater than our father, Jacob, who *gave* us this well...and drank from it himself – he and his sons – and his cattle?"

The woman appears to be poking fun at Jesus, doesn't she? Do not miss the irony of her sarcasm. Here *she* is, speaking to the Master of Life about *depth*, when her own life is so miserably *shallow*.

But Jesus wasn't just flirting with the woman, of course, and then she perceived something quite sincere in his response: "Everyone who drinks of *this* water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that *I* shall give will never again thirst. The water that *I* shall give will become in you a *spring* of water welling up to eternal life."

Using the same word – water – they talked of vastly different things. To her, water was a *necessity*, laboriously carried from the well. Not unlike us, *she* thought of creature comforts and needs close at hand. But how much *more* Jesus offered in the living water of which *he* spoke. This woman's mind, though, moved only the short distance from the water down below to the top of the well. An honored ancestor, Jacob, had dug it, and she would let no stranger belittle the gift of so great a man. Jacob, indeed, had dug the well of the *community's faith*. To the degree that religion still had *some* place in this woman's life, she valued the well's tradition as a spiritual heirloom from Jacob and other heroes of the remnant of her childhood faith. But that well of her childhood faith *should* have held an ever *deeper* meaning.

If you were to go to Israel today, you could still take a journey to Samaria, to the town of Sychar, a place the passage of time seems to have forgotten. Only about 300 people live there now, but they still consider themselves Samaritans. The most evident structure in town is a kind of cellar, which houses a well, the only source of water for miles around. Archaeologists estimate its date as upwards of 4,000 years. Weary travelers have quenched their thirst

there since the time of Jacob. But even more fascinating than its archaeological significance is that this place historically validates for us the *precise location* where this Samaritan woman had an encounter with the Christ. It's hard to believe, but the authenticity of this well is *undisputed*. Samaritans, Muslims, Christians, and Jews *all agree* that this is the location where the story took place!

For Jacob, faith had been an epoch-making *adventure*, unlocking new discoveries, *remolding* him from the devious schnook that he *started out* as into the man of God whose spiritual strength and integrity would bless and inspire a whole nation of people. But for this woman no such concept of creative renewal remained in her psyche. She was whipped; life, and even her religion, had thoroughly done her in. What was left of religion in her life were the boring, relatively meaningless, judgmental and restrictive practices of the people around her, who *judged her* to be even lower dogs than *they* were.

So how goes *your* religion for *you*?

Many of us today recall with fondness John F. Kennedy's challenge to "Ask not what your country can do for you, but rather ask what you can do for your country." So with Jesus, prefacing what *he* might give the *woman*, began with something that *she* could do for *him*.

Isn't it peculiar what barriers we throw up to defend ourselves against him, even as did this Samaritan woman? *Wanting* his *gifts*, we are yet *afraid* of *him*. A bit more conversation with the Samaritan woman may help us to see *ourselves* more clearly.

Perhaps *testing* Jesus, or maybe even starting to *trust* him – we can't really know for sure – she continues: "Sir, *give* me this water of which you speak, so that I may neither thirst nor need to come here any more to draw *this* water."

Jesus replies, "Go get your husband and come back here."

The woman answers evasively, "I have no husband," probably hoping that Jesus will not pursue it any further, but no such luck. He doesn't let *us* off the hook that easily either, does he?

"You are honest in saying so," he continues, "for you *have* had *five* husbands, and the man you now live with is *not* your husband; this you have said truthfully."

Busted! Realizing now that Jesus knows exactly who she is and the kind of life she has led, she tries to take further evasive action (just as we would do!): "Uh...sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our forebears worshiped on *this mountain*...and yet you *Jews* say that *Jerusalem* is the place where the faithful ought to worship."

Here she plunges into an old, tired religious argument as a diversion, for this stranger had brought the conversation around to matters that were too personal and too painful for her to discuss. She was ready to accept his generous gift of living water, you see, but only for selfish purposes. Jesus replied, however, that *she couldn't have it just for herself alone*; it integrally involved her life with others. Relentlessly he probed her painful, shameful spots: her failed marriages, and this unfortunate, illicit affair of her present life that brought neither honor to God nor lasting comfort to herself. Desperate for an escape hatch, she took this age-old course – ironically – flight *from God*...into *religion*!

Jesus wasn't buying it. Nor was he *selling* that. While the woman was "busted" in terms of Jesus already knowing all about her, he wasn't about to bust *on* her, for he indiscriminately loves all hungry and thirsty people who recognize their need for reform. *From a religion of escapism* he invited her...to a religion of *reality*: "Woman, believe me," he said, "the hour is coming when neither on this mountain *nor* in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. *You* worship what you *do not know*; we worship what we *do* know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." That is, in word *and* in *action*. Truth counts, Jesus is saying; not just what you *say* you believe, but how you *live out* that belief.

As the conversation comes to a close, the woman, trying desperately again to postpone the *urgency* of the faith with which Jesus is trying to impress her, declares: "I know that the Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things."

Then Jesus says it as plainly as it can be said: "I who speak to you am he."

Her sense was that such a divine visitation would surely come "someday," but just not *now*. Like us, she looked wistfully ahead to "some other time." But Jesus did not let the moment escape her. That time is now, he said, and "I who speak to you am he."

And then what happened? She had received Jesus' self-revelation of his divinity, and she had confessed – however reluctantly – her sinful condition. So *now* what? She went out and told others about this one who knew her so well...yet still loved her. While her words of witness to her fellow townspeople still revealed some reservations, God used her to share the good news of divine love and healing power.

Have you ever heard the legend of the Fisher King? When the Fisher King was a boy, he was sent out to spend the night alone in a forest, as a test of his courage and ability to become king. During the night he had a vision of the Holy Grail – the cup used by our Lord at the Last Supper. He saw it surrounded by great flames of fire, and he immediately became excited by the prospect of the wealth and glory that would be his by *possessing* such a great prize. Greedily, he reached into the flames to grab it, but the flames were too hot, and he was severely wounded. As the years went by, the Fisher King became more despondent and alone, and his wound grew deeper. One day, feeling sad and depressed and in pain, he went for a walk in the forest and came upon a court jester. "Are you alright?" the jester asked. "Is there anything I can do for you? Anything at all?"

"Well, I *am* very *thirsty*," the Fisher King replied. The jester then took an old, dilapidated cup from his bag, filled it with water from a nearby stream, and gave it to the Fisher King. As he drank, he suddenly felt his wound healing for the first time. And incredibly, the old cup from which he had been drinking

turned into the Holy Grail. “What wonderful magic is this that you possess?” the Fisher King asked the jester.

The jester just shrugged and said, “I know no magic. I only gave a drink of water to a thirsty soul.”

Jesus offers to us such living water, so that we may drink deeply of it, and then pass it on to others in his name. What, then, do *you* have of his to pass on to others, and what difference might it make when you do?

Written by Pastor Dave Poland
of the Oak Lane Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, PA,
for his congregation’s home reading and meditation
during the 2020 coronavirus outbreak.

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Pastoral Prayer

We thirst, O God, for that foundation, that rock, upon which our church was built. We thirst for your touch of grace, of hope, of forgiveness, of promise. We give thanks that you leave us not alone in our times of trouble and in our times of temptation. It is your Spirit that comforts us in our distress as we worry about this present virus and the need for us to be temporarily separated. Quell our fears and anxieties, and remind our hearts that you are still in control. When our faith falters, remind us of those scripture passages that have sustained our faith during past periods of stress and turmoil. And make us mindful of the living water that enlivens and restores our faith.

We ask your special presence with the leaders of this nation and of all nations that are wrestling with the present crisis. Help them to know you and to put their trust and confidence in you as they seek to meet their challenges head on. Make this an opportunity for unity in our nation, and help us to be sowers of peace and cooperation.

Bless those of our number who are weak or infirm, and help us all to be more than conquerors in your name, even the name of Jesus. Amen.