

John 4:1-15 – The Woman and the Living Water

Let's Pray: Almighty God and Father, giver of life, ever flowing fountain of living water, cleansing us, hydrating us, soothing, and cooling us as we walk through the dry land of this world. Let your Word be a fountain to our souls as your Spirit opens it for us, **Amen**.

Here we come back to John's Gospel after a couple weeks off (which I am grateful for!). The last time we were in John, we were looking at Nicodemus, the "teacher of Israel" who needed to be born again, and then John the Baptist whose humility shows what is needful for salvation, a repentant, humble, contrite spirit, recognizing one's own sin, "what is in humanity" as Jesus puts it.

Here we come to what might be your favorite story in the Bible, the Samaritan woman at the well. I have already heard from one of you that is the case. I am not surprised that this story is a favourite, it is an incredibly rich and layered story with many allusions and allegories. For many of you, the importance lay in how Jesus gives an incredible grace to someone who everyone else overlooks. A person who would be totally shunned from polite society, especially to a Jew, is the first one that Jesus tells he is the Messiah.

We are going to sit with the woman at the well for a few weeks. First, this morning, we will look at Jesus' promise of living water. Next week we will look at Jesus' desire for true worship. Last, we will look at how this story informs our mission in the world as Christ's church.

As I have said before, John (and more importantly, the Holy Spirit) puts all these stories together for a specific purpose. When Jesus interacts with a person in the text, we are supposed to identify with that person. Here, this is especially true. The Samaritan woman gives us a picture of us, the church, foreigner gentiles, saved by God's grace alone. I invite you to picture yourself as the woman at the well interacting with our Lord as we read this story.

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, John 4:1-15:

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John **2** (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), **3** he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. **4** And he had to pass through Samaria. **5** So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. **6** Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

7 A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." **8** (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) **9** The Samaritan woman said to him,

“How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) **10** Jesus answered her, “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.”

11 The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? **12** Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.” **13** Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, **14** but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” **15** The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.

¹⁶ He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

¹⁷ “I have no husband,” she replied.

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

¹⁹ “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

²¹ “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

²⁵ The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

²⁶ Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”

²⁸ Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people,

²⁹ “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” ³⁰ They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Slide 14

What comes to your mind when we use the phrase ‘living water’? Maybe we think of a gushing geyser like ‘Old Faithful’ in Yellowstone. Or maybe a rushing river of white water. There are a few rivers from my hometown that come to mind for me. Maybe, rather than the life being in the movement of the water, we think of the life the water creates, like an oasis in a desert. All around you see the death from a lack of water, but in a spot the life that comes from well-watered soil. We all know there must be water for life, for plants as well as ourselves.

When Jesus speaks about living water in this passage, he speaks in a way that confuses the woman in the story. We might be getting used to Jesus doing this to people by this point in John’s gospel. Like in Jesus’ interaction with Nicodemus, where he speaks of being born again, Jesus uses common terms to refer to deeper realities. Of course, Jesus is the one in whom all things were made, as we heard in the first chapter. When God created the world out of nothing, he made water as a specific sign that would point us to himself in many and various ways. Today, I want to look at water as a source of life, pointing to eternal life.

Jesus says that the living water that he offers wells “up to eternal life.” Like being ‘born again’, given an eternal birth, Jesus offers water that can quench thirst forever. Jesus is offering something that is fit for a life that will never end. This is an eternal water, not simply the water that we experience here today. Truly, the water that Jesus offers will quench the real eternal thirst that we all have, that is for God himself.

Slide 15

As we look at the story a little deeper, we find Jesus leaving the scene with John the Baptist, as Jesus’ increasing popularity was drawing some heat from the Pharisees. The text says that Jesus wanted to go back to Galilee, and that he “had to go through Samaria.” Now, there were three major ways to get to Galilee from Judah at this time, but the most direct route was through Samaria. Very strict Jews would have gone around Samaria to avoid contact with them.

Slide 16

The text says that Jesus, who was tired from his journey, which would have been about a day and a half of walking at this point, rested at Jacob’s well in Sychar. The plot of land given to Jacob is mentioned in Genesis 48:22. Interestingly, we actually have pretty good evidence of the exact well that Jesus stopped at, as there has been a church there consistently since the second century. The well is a dug-out cistern fed by an underground spring, that remains a source of water to this day.

As we have gone through John's gospel, we have been constantly coming back to the theme of humility. As Jesus passes through Samaria, we find someone who is humble, though not by choice it seems, but by situation.

Slide 17

To a Jew like Jesus and his disciples, the Samaritan woman is the last person you would expect them to want to associate with. Samaritans were a kind of mixed race of Jew and Gentile. When the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell into exile by the Assyrians, they became prone to intermarriage, and their religion was significantly compromised.

Slide 18

The Northern Kingdom was always more prone to idolatry than Judah. Reading through Kings and Chronicles gives a good picture of just how compromised the Northern Kingdom could be. I remember reading through Kings and Chronicles with Heidi when she was little, and she would say is it a good king or a bad king? In the Northern Kingdom, they were all bad. The best you get is Jehu, who wiped out the line of Ahab.

Slide 19

By the time that Jesus was speaking to this woman, the Samaritans had mostly done away with their idolatry and worshiped the true God, but they did so in a compromised way. Eventually, the Samaritans even set up their own rival temple to Jerusalem on Mt. Gerizim. Not only this, but they only accepted the books of Moses as Scripture, probably because the rest of the Bible makes them look pretty bad! To the Jews, the Samaritans weren't simply like gentiles, not knowing God, they were heretics. They should know better, which in a way makes them worse than gentiles.

Slide 20

Besides this woman being a Samaritan heretic, she is also something of a woman of disrepute (to put it nicely). It comes out later that she has been divorced five times and is now in an adulterous relationship. This is probably why she has to come to the well at noon, the hottest time of the day, as she is a social outcast. Even among her own compromised people, she isn't welcome. As I said before, she isn't humble out of her own discipline, but has been humbled. It would be taboo for a man to speak to a woman in this situation at the best of times, let alone a woman like this.

In many ways, this woman is experiencing all the effects of sin in her life. Her life looks more like death. Remember in the garden of Eden, God promises death as a consequence for sin. In our lives we too can easily see that when we go against God's law it leads to death rather than life. While God does not promise that everything will be well in our lives

on this earth if we follow him, we will at least be spared the effects of our sin, and spare others the effects of our sin. I'm sure we can all bring to mind lives well lived that showed God's creation working as he intended it to, and at the same time think of those who rebelled against God's way and feel the sting of their consequence.

As a Samaritan, this woman had no choice but to be brought up into a community that is in rebellion to God's word, a culture of death. They were worshipping God in a way that he did not command, rejecting his prophets. In her own life she was also rejecting God's law, bringing further death and dysfunction. At the beginning of Moses' law God promises blessing to his people if they follow his law, true and full lives undoing some of the curse of sin. But along with blessing for obedience, there is cursing for disobedience. This woman seems to be feeling the curse, a life marked by sin and dysfunction.

It is not difficult to imagine this woman, because we have all seen the effects of sin around us. Sometimes this is feeling the effects of other people's sin, their bad choices effecting our lives. This is even seen in our own culture of death as our society continues to rebel against God's natural order. If we are honest with ourselves, most of the effects of sin we experience are a result of our own sin, leading to our own dysfunction, and feeling the curse for it.

Slide 21

However, Jesus comes to undo this curse. He comes to this woman to bring life to a place of death. She is puzzled by why a 'prophet' like him would talk to her, remember what the Samaritans thought of the prophets. To the one who knows what is in humanity, we are all sinners in need of his grace, some of us know it better than others. While the Samaritans of old would through the prophets out, now that they are invigorated with new life, they are able to receive them.

It is not an accident that this story about living water comes directly after we hear about Jesus' disciples baptizing with John the Baptist. Remember, John the Baptist scandalously was asking those already born Jews, and even Jewish leaders, to go through the same practice as new converts. John was saying that their birth did not matter as they had not followed God's law. They must come again to God like a new convert.

Jesus agrees with John the Baptist's message, but he recognizes that John's baptism of repentance alone will not bring reformed lives, even if it is essential to begin this way. One must have a 'fountain of living water within them.' John himself recognized this, saying that Jesus "gives the Spirit without measure."

Slide 22

In the Old Testament God refers to himself as 'living water' in Jeremiah 2:13 saying, "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." While God is the source of true life, his people desire what life they can make for themselves.

Slide 23

Sometimes living water is a reference to God's revelation in scripture, as in Prov.13:14, "The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death." God clearly connects the life that he gives his people as the kind of life that is like clean water in the desert.

Slide 24

In response to their unfaithfulness, God says through the prophet Zechariah that when he comes in judgement, "living water will flow out from Jerusalem..."(Ze.14:8). Isaiah 44:3 too says, "I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants." This pouring of living water as the gift of the Spirit is what Jesus brings.

Slide 25

John defines the living water that Jesus gives as the Holy Spirit in John 7:37-39 saying, "Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. ³⁸Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." ³⁹By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified."

The title of living water for the Holy Spirit is fitting as he brings the new life of repentance and cleansing regeneration in believers. The cleansing waters of the Old Covenant, as in John's baptism, did not fix the root of the problem. John's baptism of repentance could show them how their hearts should approach God, but the Spirit had not yet come to restore them, to heal them of their sinful nature. It is only with the coming of the Holy Spirit that is transformation possible. A person must be 'born again,' born with eternal life springing from inside them.

Just like with being born again, the gift of the Spirit is sometimes confused with having an ecstatic experience. But that is not what Jesus is talking about here. He is talking about what is necessary to have eternal life. To have eternal life, one needs to be connected to the source of life.

Slide 26

The woman responds to Jesus saying that he has living water by asking whether he is 'greater than our father Jacob.' Now, while there is something funny about this question now that we see it in hindsight, but this question is very important to the story as God chose Jacob's well to have this conversation. Jacob, whose name is changed to Israel, is where God's people get their name; where they get their heritage, as his twelve sons are those who constitute the twelve tribes of Israel. Now Jesus comes and will bring a new way of creating God's people, one that will include the woman that he is speaking to, and eventually you and me. This is a way that will bring eternal life to the world.

Jesus will remake his people by giving those who believe in him "a spring of water welling up to eternal life." It is important to note the difference in the imagery that Jesus is using here. Jesus contrasts the 'well' of Jacob, as a cistern or a body of water that is replenished by rainfall or ground water. This kind of water is fine for what it is, but it is a depleting resource. Even if it has maintained its water until today, one day it will run out. Like a cistern, the worship of the old covenant it must be continually replenished.

Slide 27

In distinction to this cistern, a spring of living water is defined by being connected to the source of the water. This kind of water is typically cleaner, as it is constantly flowing rather than remaining stagnant. Jesus is saying that the water that he brings is a constant source of life because it is directly connected to the source of the purity, which is the life of the Holy Spirit.

To this mystical living water, the woman seems stupefied. She takes Jesus literally, thinking how wonderful it would be to not have to come to this public place as an outcast in the middle of the hot day. She says, "Sir [Lord], give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." What the NIV translates as 'Sir' is usually translated as 'Lord'. While we know that she was likely just being polite, and using a designation of respect, we know that she speaks beyond her understanding.

She, not understanding Jesus' directing her to eternal life rather than merely physical life, perceives her need as only being the material. Jesus knows that she has another thirst, one that is the cause of her having to come to the well at the sixth hour in the first place. She knows that she feels the pangs of death around her, and she desires Jesus' eternal life, even if she doesn't know it yet.

In the next weeks we will see how this living water will change her, how it will break into their society, how it will change their worship, and even what they care about. Her

perspective on the world is changing because of the new life that is filling her. No, she does not have it all figured out, but her desires are changing.

I love the way the text says the woman left. It says, “leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town...” She has forgotten her thirst and must go and proclaim Christ. This is a sign of eternal life in us, seeking eternal things.