

"at the well"

John 4:5-42

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In ancient and medieval times, it was not unusual for a well to be considered a holy sites A "holy well" was a place of pilgrimage, a place where people went to pray or be baptized, or sometimes a site for celebrations on special days. Often a holy well was thought of as a place to find healing – which might have its origins in the simple fact of its water being safe and drinkable. It was common for such a well to be associated with the story of a holy or important person.

Such was the case with Jacob's well, where Jesus asked an unnamed woman for a drink of water. The association with one of the most important ancestors of Israel made this a notable site. This well was a symbol of the history of God's people, and of God's faithfulness to them.

It's no wonder, then, that "well" is also a powerful metaphor: it says, "source," "life," "strength," "inspiration." Even though we don't gather at village wells for our water anymore, the idea lives on in our language. When we run out of creative ideas, we say that "the well is dry." When it's hard to find courage and strength, we try to "dig deep." I think of Emmylou Harris's wonderful song, in the voice of someone who has searched for meaning in all the wrong places:

*"Found I had a thirst that I could not quell,
Lookin' for the water from a deeper well."*

So when we hear this story that John's gospel tells us, we shouldn't be surprised that a conversation which starts out as a simple request for a drink of water turns into so much more. After all, the conversation takes place at a well.

It deals with questions of faith: who has the truth? Where is God to be found? Where is God to be worshipped? What does God want of us? Where do we find ... whatever it is that we are thirsting for in our lives?

This is a sacred conversation.

It's also real, it's boundary-crossing, and it's respectful.

The encounter between Jesus and this woman of Samaria is not politely distant and superficial, but honest with questions and different perspectives, and acknowledgement of uncomfortable social realities.

It is a boundary-crossing conversation:

Jews like Jesus and Samaritans like this woman shared common ancestors and many beliefs but were divided by religious differences that led each group to regard the other as, well, *other*—wrong, inferior, unclean.

Men and women unrelated to one another didn't commonly converse together like this. Respectable religious people didn't associate themselves with those whose lives are messy, complicated, and – for whatever reason – lived outside the norms of proper behavior.

And yet Jesus *does* have this conversation with the woman he meets by the well, and it's a respectful conversation. Jesus doesn't come around to agreeing with the Samaritan perspective (and it's not clear that the woman actually changes her mind about everything either). But she obviously feels able, in the moment, to speak up. He brings up her life story; we often read or hear his words as if they are judgement or scolding, but she doesn't seem to. Which leads me to think he's simply stating the facts; we have no idea what's brought about the circumstances of this woman's life, or how much choice she has had in any of it. At any rate, she doesn't seem to take offense at Jesus' observation. Her only response to his insight: "I can see you're a prophet." Then she goes on to raise the tough and touchy question of these long-standing differences that have created the deep divide of animosity between his people and hers. And we can see a bridge being built across that divide.

This is a sacred conversation... the kind we rarely have, even with a close friend, let alone a stranger.

It must have taken courage, openness, maybe a genuine desire for that "water from a deeper well" that you just can't get from platitudes, from the preoccupations of consumer culture, from turning a blind eye to reality, from beliefs familiar but unexamined, from practices that are nothing more than mindless habits, from sticking only to what seems "safe."

I think we are in need of such conversations in our lives, now more than ever... and perhaps we are at a place when we can be more open to them.

In these days when we are needing to maintain boundaries of social distance, we also need to be looking beyond those walls we put up and the lines we draw to see our connectedness, to embrace those we thought were "other" with compassion and respect, to focus not only on protecting ourselves but on how we may protect and help the most vulnerable.

Resources and privilege and safety may afford some sense of security, but they don't answer our existential questions. Some of the things that usually occupy our energy don't seem so important all of a sudden. We don't have time for superficial right now.

We are being reminded in these days to think about what really matters. We need a strength more than what we can muster with willpower or positivity.

We are looking for water from a deeper well.

We are living with a lot of fear right now. We are having to reassess our priorities – and the priorities of our society. We are facing the potential of massive disruptions to our lives. We are worried for our loved ones, as well as ourselves.

We, too, are asking: Where is God? Where are we going to worship God, and how? What does God want of us? What is true? What will heal us? What will satisfy our thirst? What will sustain us over the long haul?

One of the blessings of these past couple of weeks for me has been the opportunity to have one-on-one conversations, by phone, with quite a few people – sharing our anxieties, needs, wisdom, heartbreak, hope, humor, gratitude, inspiration, encouragement. We need these kinds of sacred conversations – with one another... AND with Jesus.

Such conversations are full of possibility. They lift us up. They deepen relationships. They build bridges. They grow our compassion. They let us see a different perspective. They might open new windows on life for us. We saw just those things happen as a result of the conversation the Samaritan woman had with Jesus. Herstory helps us see that there is a place to bring all that we are and all that we wonder and all that we need and all that we long for into conversation with God. In the sacred space of this story, we are reminded that God doesn't live on a holy hill in Samaria, or in the temple in Jerusalem, or in any church sanctuary. God is wherever we are. Wherever we are is sacred space. Wherever we worship, God will meet us.

In our overhearing of this conversation at the well, we are brought back to our Source. We are reminded that the well of God's grace and strength

Is deep
Is for us
Is enough
Is our life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.