

R. Justice Schunior  
March 19, 2017  
The Third Sunday in Lent  
John 4:5-42

### Quenching our Thirst

What did you notice about that reading<sup>1</sup>? Did something jump out to you that would have been harder to notice if I had just read this long gospel out loud? For me, that something that jumps out is that this story is a conversation. Jesus has a long bit of lines in the middle, but mostly it's a lot of back and forth.

The readings we do from John's gospel in Lent this year are all conversations. The characters' ideas develop through discussion, theology unfolds rather than is pronounced. The conversations in John produce dawning realization, the sense of being on the verge of grasping much more. And it's that sense of not quite understanding that keeps the characters and perhaps us in the conversation.

Good conversation has its own kind of magic. My best friend, Maureen and I can really have a conversation. We both taught English in China and when we left the country together we kept a conversation going over 48 hours. We talked and talked as we traveled by bus, plane, and train back to the states. We were so delirious, we got lost in a Canadian airport and almost missed the plane we arrived for six hours ahead of time.

The conversations with my family when I was little were opportunities to be seen as a kind of equal, not just a little girl. I wanted to be in on the discussion of politics, religion, and art that animated my older family members and kept us talking well into the night.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Gospel reading was acted out by parishioners instead of being read by the priest

And Andrew and I both went to a school where conversation was paramount. We began each class with a question and made an attempt to construct a conversation that would lead us to greater wisdom though often it would lead us just to greater frustration. But sometimes it worked and we would marvel at the progress we made together.

The conversation Jesus has with the woman at the well does make a lot of progress, but look at how it begins. Jesus and the woman will go on to talk about identity and politics and religion, but see how simply it all begins. Jesus is thirsty. It's been a long trip; it's the middle of the day and it's hot. He asks for a drink of water.

The woman's response to this request highlights the next way that this conversation is out of the ordinary. What's he doing talking to her? She's a Samaritan and he's a Jew. Samaritans and Jews did not have contact with each other. They had a dispute going back hundreds of years regarding the proper location of worship. For Jews it was Jerusalem; for Samaritans it was the mountain. They hated each other. Furthermore, there is the additional taboo of a strange man talking to a woman.

But she stays. She doesn't ignore him or rebuke him. She lets her curiosity get the better of her. I wonder if that's something we've lost these days, simple curiosity. Who is this person who breaks taboos?

The conversation moves from the concrete (Jesus is thirsty) to the abstract (this living water that Jesus offers) and the woman, like Nicodemus, like most of us, has a hard time making the jump. Living water literally is water that's flowing, water from a spring, whereas dead water is water collected in a cistern; it's still. However, Jesus is talking about more than that.

But the woman seems to grasp that it might be something more and we can imagine along with her. Dead water is the doing the same old same old – watching the same old television shows, having the same old arguments, being stuck in the same old death dealing habits. Living Water is release from all of that. It would be worth knowing where to find that kind of living water.

Secondly, he seems to know her, to see her as no one else could. “Go and get your husband” he tells her. “I have no husband” she says. “I know. You have had five husbands and the man you are with now is not your husband.”

First let me say that any interpretation you have heard where this woman has been “forgiven” by Jesus or where she seems to be confessing some dark secret to him is just plain wrong. There is nothing in the text that suggests that she is ashamed of her many husbands or that Jesus offers any kind of absolution. Misogyny has a long history in biblical criticism and this woman has been one of its many victims.

This woman would have had no agency of her own in these marriages. It’s not as if she had the power to flit from man to man. Her five marriages suggest tragedy not loose morals. It could be that the men she married have died, maybe even more likely, she is barren and finally no man will give her the protection of marriage. She is alone. Who but the saddest and loneliest of women comes to the town well at midday alone? And who but the saddest and loneliest woman would be willing to speak at length with this strange Jew?

The setting of their meeting is staged as a kind of first century Jewish meet cute. Readers of the genre would be familiar with a man and a woman meeting at a well. It is known

as Jacob's well, where Jacob met Rachel. Wells are where young women meet their future husbands.

But this rom com genre is subverted to point to a deeper relationship that will take place. This woman who has had no luck in love or marriage will find someone who sees her pain and abandonment and will offer connection. To her, and not to the disciples, or the religious authorities, or any sort of person considered important by the world, but to her he reveals who he is. "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." He says in our translation in response to her statement that she believe the messiah will come into the world. But actually what he says is even more shocking. He says, "I am." "I am", the name that Yahweh gives to Moses when he asks this strange being's name in Exodus. "I am" is the name of God. Jesus, a man who hungers and thirsts and questions and discusses, this is what God looks like to Christians.

And she, in turn, this nameless woman in this God forsaken place, is the first to call him savior. What saves her? What is salvation for this woman who has been abandoned and abandoned and considered worthless? It is relationship. It is connection. Salvation in John's gospel does not come through stating the right set of positions; salvation in John's gospel develops out of relationship and it is caught up in both the real, the concrete, and the abstract.

To say that we come to know God through conversation and vulnerability is one part of the story, but there is more. This story follows closely on the story of Nicodemus –the man who came by night to Jesus. In that conversation, Jesus told him that God so loved the world that he gave the world his only son. Michele preached on that famous scripture eloquently. And this story puts that into practice. What does loving the world look like?

For Jesus it means going to the most despised place to the most despised people and finding the most vulnerable person there and making a connection. We can start these conversations with the concrete – our own very real curiosity, the real thirst of those in a world where water is under siege. It's over 1000 days since the government of Michigan allowed the water of Flint to be poisoned; the water keepers of Standing Rock were with us last week telling the story of how their sacred water is threatened by an oil pipeline. We rely on oil, but we cannot drink it. The waters of this city are still polluted and our current government shows an almost willful disinterest in this most basic building block of life.

The Jesus of the gospel of John tells us that we are called not merely to believe the right things about these difficult situations or push the right legislation. Our salvation comes in relationship. The conversations and relationships we build with each other, with our families and friends, are life giving, they are bubbly draughts of water straight to the soul, but our thirst will never really be quenched until we go to the dry places of this world and offer our vulnerable selves to the people there as well. The way we share the love of this God who so loved the world is by sharing ourselves, our thirsty, vulnerable selves ready to listen to the stranger who might be able to offer us, even us, something to drink.