

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL



John 4:5 "Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.' (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)"

The familiar story of the woman at the well in today's Gospel reading illustrates how numerous barriers isolate us from one another, how they separate us from the notorious "other," with whom we wish to have no contact; you know, 'those people.' This familiar story illustrates how those barriers must come down if we are ever to reconcile with one another, and how those barriers are often hidden in our ordinary lives. The woman in today's story had simply come to draw water from the famous well of Jacob. From that location, in the distance, one could see Mount Gerizim, the holy place where her people, the Samaritans, worshipped the God of Israel. But 'her' people were separated from their ancient kindred, the 'Jews.'

It was high noon when this woman came into the picture, according to the Gospel. And she was alone, and that was unusual. Women usually drew water together, and usually early in the morning or at sunset, when it was cooler. So why had this woman come alone at noon? Had her checkered past made her unacceptable to the other women of her village, or had she just decided for herself that they would reject her if she tried to join them? We do not know for sure, but there appears a second division or barrier here, this woman from her own Samaritan neighbors. All of us are sadly familiar with that pattern of segregating ourselves into acceptable and unacceptable groups. And so it is that this isolated woman meets another solitary figure at the well, who

would change her life and the life of her community forever, simply by breaking down those barriers.

Jesus and the disciples themselves were on their way north from Judea back to Galilee and had stopped by the well. The disciples left Jesus there to find some food for the noon meal. But Jews rarely traveled this route, because of their historic hatred of the Samaritans. That rift between the Jews and the Samaritans dated back to some 722 years before Jesus was born, when the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to Assyrian invaders. Most of the people there were carried off into exile never to be heard of again, the so-called 'ten lost tribes of Israel.' A few peasants, however, were left behind and they intermarried with the settlers that the Assyrians brought in to repopulate the region. Thus, these half-breeds became the hated Samaritans.

The Southern Kingdom of Judah was later defeated by the Babylonians and was also carried off into exile, but they eventually returned, and when they returned, they sought to rebuild Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, that had been destroyed by the invading Babylonians. The Samaritans, the ones left behind in the North, offered to help their brothers in this task, to help them rebuilt the ancient temple that in Solomon's time people from both the north and the south worshipped in, but the Samaritans were rebuffed and rejected by the returning Jews. So, the Samaritans adopted Mount Gerizim as their alternative place of

worship, not being allowed to worship in the new Second Temple in Jerusalem. Again, we all know too well this cultural phenomenon of 'us' and 'them,' of 'our' place and 'their' place. People need to know their place in society, we say.

All of this background helps us understand the obvious surprise of the lonely, introverted, self-incriminating woman when Jesus simply asked her for a drink of water. She felt rejected by her own people in some way, such that she came to the well alone, but here was Jew, here was a man, here was a rabbi, breaking down all kinds of social norms and asking her, a woman, a Samaritan, a person of questionable moral character, for a drink of water. Jesus had just broken through a multitude of societal conventions just to speak to her. Remember that when Jesus' disciples returned, they were astonished that Jesus was speaking with a woman, alone. So, no wonder the woman responded to Jesus, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

Perhaps Jesus just saw a person in need. Perhaps he knows that we all have a hidden self, a sense of isolation and shame. Surprising to a person hiding her secrets in this way, Jesus then offered to share a secret of his own, that he had shared with no one thus far in his ministry. Jesus was himself vulnerable first. That's an important lesson for each one of us in our personal relationships. If we really wish to reconcile with one and another, we must often first be vulnerable ourselves.

So, the conversation continued playfully for a while until Jesus pushed across another barrier into the confines of her private life. "Go, call your husband, and come here," he says. "I have no husband," she confided. Then Jesus cut deeply across the protections of her secret life. What could she say to 'a man who told her everything that she had ever done'? What would we have done? Or better yet, what do we do right now when God puts his finger on the raw nerves of our secret hidden lives? God knows everything about us. God knows all our secrets and fears and private pains! There's no secluded place to hide from God.

Any inventory of humanity's deepest needs would surely include, near the top of the list, having someone understand us, having someone really know who we are, and not reject or be repulsed by us. We all want, and we all need, friends like that, people who know all about us and yet still believe in us, in spite of what he or she knows, like loving parents or spouses or just good friends. How many people really know your story in life, in all its inglorious and uncomfortable detail? For unfortunately we humans learn the power of secrets very early on in life. A child's first sense of independence and individuality often dawns on us when we realize that we can have a life of our own, in our guarded memories or private imaginations. For we all keep secrets from one another, all of us, so that no one really knows who we are in the end. We learn to control our personal relationships and our

individual circumstances by how much or how little we let other people know about the real person hidden inside of us. And so, we all end up living in two worlds: the personal realm of our own minds and emotions, and the interpersonal realm of what we want people to think and assume about us. And all we need is a few statements like "I would never have thought that about you!" from people whom we have shared some tender insight, to close us up again and to encourage us to stay behind those guarded walls of our well-polished and glittering images of ourselves that we project for the benefit of others.

But it is in that private world of ours, behind the walls, that we cram our hopes, our fears, and our failures, our hurts and disappointments, our insecurities and anxiety about the future, which we desperately pray that no one will ever uncover about us. We create masks for our faces in the ever-changing challenges of life's personal relationships and responsibilities. We memorize lines to cover up the truth. We tell people that 'we are great' and that 'things are fine,' in fear that if they really knew what was hidden behind the walls of our inner lives, they would abandon us, and then we would be truly alone. But our protective measures finally rob us of the very warmth and real love that all of us need as humans. For the law of human nature is that we will never be fully human, that we will never be completely healed and really free, until someone knows us absolutely and utterly as we are, and

still loves us. It is a truth as irrevocable as nature's law of gravity. But who can we trust? With whom can we be vulnerable?

The woman at the well tried to hide her true self, as we all do. She tried to change the subject. She complimented Jesus, calling him a prophet, and then asked a theological question, moving from the dangerous confines of her heart to the head, where it is safer. But Jesus would have none of it. Instead of engaging in a long-winded clever theological discourse, as I would have surely done, Jesus immediately told her that God loved her; and that God was greater than the geographical limits of either Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim. Listen to Jesus' compassion as he speaks. Sense the intense warmth of his revelation about God. For a woman in desperate need prompted one of the most awesome and reassuring statements about God and about us ever made. "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." --- God is not limited by our man-made religions, nor by our histories, nor by our insufficient theologies about God. God is Spirit, known in truth only in the spirit of a person. As Jesus said last week to Nicodemus, "no one can enter the kingdom of God who is not born from above," in the spiritual realm, where the wind blows, and no one know whence it comes or whither it goes.

Moreover, Jesus remarkably reveals that God is searching for us. "For such the Father seeks to worship him," he says, in one of the most gracious affirmations of the Gospel. Is it any wonder that the woman ran back to her village to tell everyone she could find about the man she had just met at the well? "Come see, can this be the Christ?" she asked. She, who had been isolated from that village, leads them all to Jesus.

The results of this amazing conversation are manifold. First is that the Lord knows us better than we know ourselves. There are no secrets with God. Yet we have been given freely the power to resist God and keep God at arm's length, and most often we do, though we cannot keep God from knowing what we do, while we hold God at bay. Secondly, opening ourselves up to Jesus and to one another brings reconciliation, brings forgiveness and healing to our lives with God and with the community in which we live. To find real forgiveness, to know the strange power of a love that will not let us go, and to feel a new sense of cleanness within, this is what it means to be saved, to be saved from all that separates us from God and from one and another. Our fears, our anxieties, insecurities, and loneliness are all rooted in that desperate need for God, our desperate longing to be known and loved for whom we really are. God is seeking us. Our true inner self that we keep so carefully guarded and protected is really meant to be God's dwelling place in us. When we allow God to take

up residence in our lives, in the secret chambers of our hearts, God forgives the past, sorts out the present, and guides our futures. We don't need to hide any longer. The persons God has freed us to be inside, can also be the persons we dare to be on the outside, where we will enjoy the freedom and joy of that abundant life that God wants for all of us. Amen.