

From the Well of Loneliness to the Well of Community

A sermon preached on the 3rd Sunday of Lent, March 8, 2026, at St Brendan Parish, Deer Isle, Maine, by the Rev. Dr. Jenny Reece

Texts: Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

Prayer: Holy God, look upon us, your thirsty, quarreling people, with your boundless mercy. May the witness of the Bible be the rock in our wilderness today. Open the Scriptures to us and pour upon us the living water of Jesus Christ. By your Holy Spirit, lead us to meet Jesus at the well of hospitality, reconciliation, and community, and to dwell with him, even in this world, in justice and peace. And so may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be blessed by you, who are indeed our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.”

Doing the will of God in this case had Jesus sitting down, in the middle of the day, in the heat of the sun, beside a village well. But this was not just any well: this was a well of deep significance in the tradition of the ancestors of both Jews and Samaritans: It was Jacob’s well, where Jacob had met and first loved his Rachel: it was a well of meeting, of love, of promise, of community. In that redemptive moment in Jacob’s twisting story, he met (first by proxy and then in his own person) a woman coming to the well for water for her flocks. But a large protective stone covered the well so that the woman, Rachel, had great difficulty accessing the water. Jacob rolled the stone away for her and they fall in love. Rolling the stone away led to new life. Jacob’s well is a well of meeting, a well of love, a well of community, of promises made, and of promises, eventually, kept.

Wells are holy places in most cultures because water is such a precious and necessary thing to human life. Especially in Celtic tradition, there are many holy wells where first pagan and then Christian people gathered to share wisdom and receive healing. One of these Holy Wells is the well of Kildare, in Ireland, where still today St. Brigid is visited by pilgrims seeking healing,

forgiveness, and community. People gather at wells: wells are a source not only of necessary water, but of that which is maybe even more necessary: togetherness, shared values and purposes, community.

But when I think of wells, I also think of a more troubling well. I think of *The Well of Loneliness*. This was a book, published in 1928 by an English poet, novelist, and woman before her time, Radclyffe Hall. Her novel, *The Well of Loneliness* was the first book published in the mainstream British press featuring a heroine who was both a lesbian and what we would call today transgender. All her life she—both the character in the story and the author herself—loved women, and with some, had deep relationships, even lasting ones, while dressing always in men’s clothes and being known to them all as “John”. The novelization of her experience was treated as totally shocking and even obscene, although there was no explicit sex scene. As soon as it was published, the book was banned. The court order issued after the obscenity trial even ordered that every copy should be found and burned. Luckily, this was never carried out completely, and pirate editions were promptly printed in France and the US. They sold like hotcakes. Although a ground-breaking book in so many ways, *The Well of Loneliness* is, as its title suggests, deeply enmeshed in the false idea that non-traditional sexuality must be problematic, and inevitably results in heartbreak, loneliness and despair for the persons experiencing it. Also, very unfortunately but not surprisingly, the book describes all same-sex affinity and gender questioning as deeply anti-Christian.

I first read this book, *The Well of Loneliness*, when I was myself a young woman struggling with my own sexual identity. It made a huge impact on me. In the newly liberated days of the 1970s, reading Radclyffe Hall’s courageous fictionalized description of her own life was both inspiring and disheartening.

It was helpful to discover that there were, after all, other people like me, struggling to understand myself and the mystery of my sexuality. But was I to be doomed to drink like Radclyffe, like “John,” from *the Well of Loneliness*? Would there never be a place for me, and for others like me, in the Christian Church? Thanks be to God that Jesus invited me to sit with him, as he sat with the woman at the well in Samaria, that he saw my thirst, and invited me with love, and without judgment, into a conversation in which he saw me, and loved me, just as I was, just as I am. Thanks be to God!

In fact, this conversation John the evangelist records in his gospel is the longest Jesus ever has with anyone. The Well of Jacob, where the gospel takes place, was indeed for the Samaritan woman a “Well of Loneliness”. She had come there alone, at midday, shunned by the other villagers because of her lifestyle. As a Samaritan, she was not in community with someone like Jesus, a Jew. As a “fallen woman,” she was not even in community with her own righteous and self-righteous neighbors. Nobody goes to the well at noon. This is a marginalized person, a woman who is from the Jewish perspective a foreigner, an alien, a heretic, and a notorious wrongdoer. Yet Jesus not only speaks to her as an equal, but listens to what she has to say and sends her back to her village with the message of his welcome at the Well of Community.

And so I too entered into a long conversation with Jesus, in which I discovered that indeed the church could and would and does receive and welcome and nurture me at the well of community. And from where I can return to my neighbors and tell them of the Messiah who sees me, knows everything I have done, and accepts me as he accepts each one of them. Each one of you.

Yes, a well is a holy place. It’s a spring, a place where waters come up from the womb of earth and generously gives of itself to those who come to it. It

gives not only physical nurture but a meeting place. Jacob met his Rachel here. The woman of Sychar met Jesus. In doing so, they met the wellspring of their lives, the love that animates everything. They received the Well-Come of the God of Love. And they discovered inside themselves a well where the Spirit resides and bubbles up as we free it through contemplating the endless love of God. We all have this deep interior well. And we are all called to drink from it, to drink deeply in prayer and contemplation: for it is only in so doing that we can experience the Well of Loneliness becoming the Well of Community

I want to return for a moment to Brigid, the saint of the well of Kildare. I want to share with you a wonderful and unusual poem attributed to her. It's a vision of the community of the saints in heaven. Perhaps it is not really surprising that this vision flowed from Celtic culture, for it is well known for a love of poetry, song, dance-- and exuberant parties:

Heaven: a Prayer attributed to St. Brigid.

I'd like to give a lake of beer to God!
I'd love the Heavenly
Host to be tipping there
For all eternity.
I'd love the folk of Heaven
to live with me,
To dance and sing.

If they wanted, I'd put at their disposal
Vats of suffering.
White cups of love I'd give them,
With a heart and a half;
Sweet pitchers of mercy I'd offer
To everyone
I'd make Heaven a cheerful spot,
Because the happy heart is true.
I'd make all folk contented for their own sake
I'd like Jesus to love me too.

I'd like the people of heaven to gather,
With the poor from all the parishes around,
I'd give a special welcome to the women,

The three Maries of great renown.
I'd sit with the beloved of God
There by the lake of beer
We'd be drinking good health forever
And every drop would be a prayer.

Brigid, the Irish woman, in her charming poem, sings so beautifully as she imagines heaven as a sort of Irish Pub, of course without the drunken sadness, but with all the cheer of good times shared.

This vision of heaven, of The Well of Community, is so important for us today. So much of what surrounds us, and what surrounded Jesus and the woman at the well, is intent on destroying community. It suited the Empire for Jews and Samaritans to be enemies. It suited the Empire to keep Jews isolated, and Samaritans marginalized. It suited – and suits-- the Empire to keep women ashamed and men taking violent or casual advantage of them. It suits authoritarian rule to cook up wars and destroy communities. Because community, love of neighbor, helping each other and loving each other across differences and boundaries of gender, ethnicity, and religion is a threat to authoritarian rule. They want to keep us all in our own well of loneliness. And we must resist. We must change the Well of Loneliness to the Well of Community.

I had the great blessing this week to attend a clergy day where a Benedictine monk, Brother James Dowd, led us to discuss and discover how community and community-building are the surest weapons we have against the unrighteousness, injustice, and chaos of today. To follow Jesus, who described his mission, and therefore ours, as “To do the will of God and to complete

God’s work” means to be in and to build community. Build it with justice, build it with kindness, and above all, build it with prayer and with contemplation. Action is necessary, but action is purposeless if not based in prayer. In Jesus,

we already have and belong to a great heavenly community of justice and peace, and with him we can make sure it becomes visible even in our world: as in heaven, so on earth.

Meanwhile, let us contemplate the joy of heaven with Brigid and with all the great company of the saints in light. Let us drink from our interior well. Let us meet Jesus there and, in meeting him, meet the whole host of heaven. Let's have a party with the saints. Let's drink together with all living things, with the ducks who persist in coming to the frozen river, with the river itself, somehow still flowing with nurture under the ice. Let us be hospitable to all who come on the journey of life with us, loving even the unlovable and welcoming even those of whom we disapprove. Let us live with the poor and make a forever dwelling beside the Well of Community. Let us look for wells of peace everywhere, and to rivers of justice that flow even in the wilderness of these times, these times of materialism, violence, and war. Let us love water. Let us live so it may always be living water, receiving its healing as we go to our interior well every day. Let us sit down at the Well of Community and drink deeply together of what Jesus offers: A spring of living water gushing up to eternal life. Amen.