

A Conversation at the Well

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on John 4:5-42

Delivered on March 15, 2020

It is noon on a scorching hot day, and a woman comes to draw water from a well. On most days she is alone when she comes, but today is different. Today a man is there. "Give me a drink," he says.

She says to him "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan, so how is it that you ask me for a drink, don't you know that Jews do not talk to Samaritans."

He says "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

"Sir, you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his flocks and herds?"

She doesn't understand, so he explains. "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never be thirsty. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

"Sir", she says, "Give me this living water. I don't want to be thirsty and keep coming."

"Go call your husband and come back."

"My husband? I don't have a husband."

"You are right when you say you have no husband. You have had five husbands but the man you now have is not your husband. So in that sense what you've said is true."

“Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. I don’t know how else you would know such things. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

He says “Believe me, the time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; but we Jews, we worship what we do know. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

She doesn’t understand much of that. What does that mean ‘the time is coming and has now come’? What does that mean ‘worshipping the Father in spirit and truth’? But she says something she thinks he will understand.

“I know the Messiah, the Christ is coming. And when he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

Then the man says “The Christ, that’s who I am.”

What do we have in this conversation? What is going on here? We have a woman going to a well to draw water, and to walk away with a heavy jar not in the cool of the early morning when all the other women gathered around, but in the heat of the day, at noon when the cruel sun overhead makes her task that much harder. But why? Well, she wants to be alone. She doesn’t want to be seen in public by the other women because she is ashamed. She has had five husbands and the man she is living with now as Jesus said is not her husband—and as far as she is concerned the cruelty of the sun beating down overhead is nothing compared to the cruelty of the women who will point and whisper, point and whisper when she comes around.

So she goes at a time when she knows they won't be around. But today unlike most days she isn't alone when she comes to the well. A man is there, a rather peculiar man—a man who talks to her even though he is a Jew and she is a Samaritan and Jews do not talk to Samaritans—and a man who talks to her about some kind of magic water, "living water" he calls it, water that she can drink and which will quench her thirst in such a way that she will never thirst again. She likes that. Of course she likes that. She is tired of having to drag a water jar back and forth out to this well every day with the sun beating down. This magic water appeals to her and she says "Give me this water sir, give me this water." But she does not know that this peculiar man is not talking about literal water, he is talking about water for her soul, water that will quench her soul and give her eternal life. So he says to her "Go call your husband and come back." She says "I have no husband" and then he tells her that she has had five husbands and the man she has now is not her husband. And that's when she knows that he is in some way divine. She doesn't know how he is divine. She calls him a prophet, but she does not know that he is much more than a prophet. A prophet is a messenger from God. But she does not know he is the long awaited Messiah, the Christ that the prophets had talked about, and she certainly does not know that he was not just sent from God but he was God in the flesh.

Now, what I want to know, this morning is this. How did she know that this man was from heaven? How did she know he was divine? Now, you might say "Pastor Rich, the answer to that question is obvious. She knew that he was different. She heard him offer her some magic water, she heard him tell her everything she'd ever done. So of course she knew he was divine." But you see lest my question be misunderstood I am not asking how she knew he was

supernatural, I am not asking how she knew he was not from this world. I'm asking how she knew he was from heaven and not from hell, how she knew he was divine and not demonic.

Somehow she knew just where he was from. Somehow she knew. And I don't know why that is, but if I had to guess, I think she knew because he spoke to something inside of her. She didn't know what living water was, but thirst, she knew what that was—"five husbands and the man you live with now is not your husband." How long had she lived with shame, the shame of coming to the well in the heat of the day when no one else was around because she couldn't bear it—the pointing and the whispering? She knew what it was to thirst, she knew what it was to thirst for a life of dignity, a life of respect, a life of self-esteem. How did she know he was divine? One who offered to quench her thirst, and one who knew just in what way she was thirsty, one who spoke to her and treated her like a human being even though the bigoted rules of that day said that people like him weren't supposed to speak to people like her, what else could he be except divine?

This woman who met Jesus is not given a name, and we know very little about her. All we know is that she was a Samaritan, and we know about her marital history, but nothing else. We know so little about her in fact, that she could really be anyone who meets Jesus, couldn't she? And I wonder if you would agree with me that whenever anyone should visit a congregation that exists in the name of Jesus Christ, they will meet a certain version of Christ that probably won't be exactly the same in any two congregations. I don't just mean that they will meet that Christ during Sunday morning worship, although they could do that, but they could meet him in that congregation's social events or in some mission event and I don't mean that the Christ they meet is necessarily the real Christ, but they will see some picture of Christ that we paint with

our words and our actions, with the way we treat them and the way we treat each other. Does anyone really doubt that? Does anyone really doubt that they will have some impression formed of the Christ we represent?

Now, I am sure that some of you out there might be saying to me, “That’s all fine and good Pastor Rich, but surely you are aware of the irony of talking about representing Christ to others at a time like this. It is fine to talk about how we represent Christ to others in ordinary times, but the coronavirus pandemic is no ordinary time. How can we show others who Christ is to us when we can’t even get together on Sunday morning?”

Well, as I stand here this morning leading our first ever live stream worship service, I am aware that this pandemic has changed the way that we worship as a church and the way we exist as a church for the foreseeable future, but I actually think this may be the greatest opportunity of our lifetime to show others who Christ is to us as the people of the church.

This week, as the news about this virus seemed to get worse and worse with every passing day, I was reminded of a story that my father told me once about something that happened to him when he was growing up in the years after World War II in South Carolina. He was going to junior high at the time, and you see when my dad was in junior high, his house was about a half a mile from the school, which as you know isn’t a terrible distance to walk for a healthy young boy in junior high, but one day at the end of school, he felt sick and came down with a fever, and as you know, when you are sick with a fever the last thing you want to do is walk a half a mile. So as the bell rang to dismiss all the kids, my dad went up to one of his best friends and said you know, I’m not feeling well, could I get a ride home with you? But the friend would run away in a panic. “No, not today, sorry can’t do it!” So he would go to another friend, “I don’t

feel well, could I get a ride home with you?" Same thing. "Not today, can't do it, bye" and they'd run away. He would approach parents that he knew in the parking lot. But they would all roll up their windows and drive away as fast as they could. You see the days when my dad was in junior high were the days of the polio epidemic. And because people were afraid that maybe my dad was coming down with polio they ran away from him as fast as their legs could carry them. They drove away as fast as their wheels would move them, leaving my dad to walk home all by himself.

The days of the polio epidemic, you see, was a time of widespread panic, and in times of widespread panic people tend not to show others compassion, and until the day he died my father remembered the lack of compassion that the people he called his "friends" showed him during this particular moment of panic.

Well, if people can remember a lack of compassion during times of panic, then I don't know about you, but I think I know what else must be true. If they could remember a lack of compassion, then surely they must also remember our genuine acts of compassion when the rest of the world seems to go crazy. When the rest of the world is living in sheer terror and that terror keeps them from doing even minimal acts of kindness, what can we do to show our neighbor that because of our faith in Jesus Christ we refuse to live in fear, and we therefore refuse to let fear stand in the way of our showing the world who Christ really is? And during this difficult time, we need not forget that there are people in our community who need compassion now more than ever. There are elderly people in our nursing homes who are cut off from all their meaningful relationships because they are not allowed to receive outside visitors. There are school children who are sitting at home with nothing to eat because for many of

them a hot school lunch is the only meal they eat all day. There are people in our community who are caught up in abusive domestic relationships for whom extra time at home these days means spending extra time around someone who abuses them. There are people who own small businesses who don't know if they're going to be able to pay their mortgage or their rent or buy food for their families this month, because the coronavirus pandemic has destroyed their business. And just as my father remembered how he was treated during a time of panic, I promise you, these people in our community will remember how we treated them in this time of panic as well.

Do you believe that most people in this world thirst in the same way that this nameless woman thirsts? Do you believe that most people in this world thirst and they are tired of thirsting? Unfortunately, most people in this world are not looking to places with the word "CHURCH" on the door to satisfy that thirst, nor are they looking to the people who gather in places with the word "CHURCH" on the door to satisfy that thirst. What will we show them to make them take a second look? What will we show them to make them see that the one we serve really does offer them living water, the kind of water that will quench their thirst forever? How will they know that the kind of Christ whose picture we paint with our actions and words is divine and not demonic? How will they know that he offers healing and not harm?