

Give Me Water  
Mary R. Brownlow  
March 19, 2017

I just love this high noon, well-side conversation that the writer of John's Gospel gives us. It's just packed full of food for thought. It is both light-hearted and profound. It seems like an odd meeting, but at the same time so commonplace. But John the careful storyteller rarely leaves anything to chance. Each encounter with Jesus is described so that we, the readers and listeners, along with those who listened in the first churches long ago, can have encounters of our own. We are invited into the narrative, asked to **be** the woman at the well. We are asked to learn from her questions, to follow her from curiosity to conversion to testimony. We are drawn into the conversation with the dusty traveler.

John the careful storyteller has also carefully ordered his Gospel. Last week, we heard about Nicodemus and Jesus. In this next chapter, we get a complete contrast. From Jerusalem we move to foreign territory, Samaria. From the private night-time visit we move to high noon. From the respected leader of the Jews we move to an outcast among a despised people. From a man we move to a woman. The last question we heard Nicodemus ask was "How can these things be?" We get the feeling that Jesus' teachings that night fell on somewhat uncertain ground. But in the prolonged series of questions and answers by the side of the well we get the sense that here is a real listener, here is the kind of receptivity and engagement that Jesus was hoping for. Maybe she was just thirstier than Nicodemus. Maybe she needed it all just a little bit more.

The encounter. Two things are striking about it. One is the **impropriety** of it: a man and a woman alone, strangers, maybe enemies, they shouldn't be talking or touching or sharing. It was a socially, and therefore religiously, awkward and dangerous situation. The other surprise is that Jesus seems to be the one in **need**. Tired out by the journey, he does not follow his disciples into the town on their food shopping trip. He really must have needed that drink of water. The Samaritan woman may have been shocked, may have been intrigued, may have been sympathetic. In any case, she was hooked into a conversation. So in our process of listening to the storyteller and seeing ourselves as this woman, we might ask the question: which dangerous, charged situation could be the scene for a teaching encounter? Where is that edgy place where we risk a bit by getting involved? And is it a question of **need** that rises first?

As we get deeper into conversation, though, the tables are turned. There is a growing sense that this man is more than he seems. Is he offering something? Suggesting that there's more to life than the daily trip to the well? We need water to live: it's the most basic need of life. Or is there a more basic thirst, a deeper reality than physical survival? Like the woman at the well, we are getting more than we bargained for. We did not sign up for this. All we wanted was to get through the day in a reasonable manner. All we wanted was to be decent to the traveling stranger. All we wanted was to come to the Norwich Congregational Church and have a nice hour in the pew, with lovely music and a chance for spiritual reflection. Why confuse the issue with living water, gushing streams and eternal life?

Now that she's all tangled up in this confusing conversation, Jesus changes the subject: "Go, call your husband, and come back." What? What does her husband have to do with all this? Or, you mean this is not just an interesting theological discussion...he cares how I live? Fine, I'll just deflect the question. "I have no husband," she says. It doesn't work. "Jesus seems to know lots more about me than I am willing to admit. OK, stranger, so you must be a prophet, you've got some inside knowledge. But you're still one of those foreigners: you expect people to worship in a certain way in a certain place. That's not where I am coming from. You worship in Jerusalem; I have my own spirituality, my own traditions, my own expectations." This is spiritual self-defense at work. We can sympathize with the woman at the well as she tries to assert herself and maintain her boundaries against this strange man. We too often resist the voice that confronts our assumptions about the "way we do things here."

Jesus the truth-teller, the insightful one who knows about husbands and the lack of them, doesn't get sidetracked by this insistence of difference. He is looking beyond local custom and local practice, beyond the safe barriers we construct for our religion. When she says, "Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain," she is talking about a temple that had been destroyed by the Jewish monarchy a hundred and fifty years earlier. The woman at the well does not know, as the readers do, that Jesus had already sharply criticized the way worship had been corrupted in Jerusalem's Temple. Also, by the time that this Gospel was written, the Temple at Jerusalem had been destroyed just as completely as the one on the Samaritan mountain had been earlier. The place doesn't matter. He talks about something called "true worship." He suggests that God is seeking us out, and that God is Spirit. This is a bigger question than which Temple or which Church. The mysterious divine Spirit is seeking us out. The mysterious human spirit responds. Truth is revealed in the encounter. So now the woman has something to think about. As do we.

Rather abruptly, the conversation comes to an end. Perhaps the woman was frightened away by the group of disapproving disciples returning from town. Perhaps she was just so preoccupied with these new ideas that she had to bounce them off someone: her next-door neighbor, her friends. In any case, she has forgotten her water and her water jar, and runs back to town. "Come and see this man," she says. Still a bit tentative, a bit insecure, she frames her new understanding as a question: "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" How like human nature, how like all of us. Something happened. This conversation was important. This man knows about me. He has a new vision. But my neighbors will probably think I'm crazy. They already know I'm the one with multiple "husbands": I'm not the most reliable person ever. I think I've met the Messiah. But what's the chance that the Messiah would speak to me? And what's the chance that anyone would listen to my testimony? So, "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" Even though he has shone a searchlight of truth into every corner of my life.

Meanwhile, Jesus' disciples are having a moment of crisis themselves. They too are preoccupied with the impropriety of Jesus talking to that woman. They too are focused on the business of daily survival: food to eat. Jesus shines the searchlight on them too. He suggests that there is more to their journey than just getting along. He is sustained by his purpose, his mission his goals. For some reason this seems to be news to the insiders, the disciples. Jesus says, "Look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. Forget whether there's enough food for our lunch, forget your worries about my inappropriate behavior, and look to the big picture: the big harvest." Once again, we, the listeners, are drawn in. What are our preoccupations? Accumulating money? Financial security? Maybe sure our behavior appears proper and moral? None of these things will feed us spiritually. Unless we are driven by the world's deeper needs and a wider sense of

service we have missed the “the will of Him who sent” Jesus. Overflowing water, abundant food: the “great harvest “ begins in odd places, like Samaria, and the people who plant and gather join in a big joyful family. But first, lose the disapproval and put down your precious lunch.

And here’s the payoff, the big surprise. You know that strange woman, who everyone avoids? You know those dangerous Samaritans, who’ve been at our throats for centuries? Turns out they are good listeners. They get the thing about living water. They get that Jesus has a message of salvation for everyone. Turns out they’re really hospitable too. Who would have guessed that we’d be invited in to stay for two days? They are sharing their food and water and their company. We have a lot in common, really.

This whole story is about the conversion of an individual and the conversion of a community. We see it with both our friend the woman at the well and our friends the disciples. It begins with that tension between suspicion and belief, with misunderstanding the faith symbols of the community. Many readers could identify with the woman’s first tentative steps towards Jesus’ message. This is followed by a confrontation with one’s past life: seeing what is true in the light of Jesus’ careful probing. A recognition of this uncanny power of Jesus is next, along with thinking about what “true worship” might be. This leads to an understanding of Jesus as the Messiah, someone worth following, and wanting to talk to other people about it. These conversations then lead to more people examining their knowledge and belief.

So we have a spiraling series of questions confronting a woman at noon and us as we journey in faith: Should we speak to this stranger? What kind of person is Jesus? A Jew, a teacher, a prophet, a messiah? What kind of water does he offer? What kind of worship is true? What kind of food does he speak of? What kind of belief do we have? And who is the Savior of the world? This last question points us back to a new understanding of the first. This is a success story, but it is not a complete story. This is a well of living water, not an image frozen in time. From it, we should get both discomfort and encouragement. In the way that the discomfort of thirst sends us to the well, we can visit the story again and again, visit the questions again and again. Who is this man? Should we speak to him? Is it safe?

Our answer to that last question, “Is it safe?” must be somewhat nuanced. No, it is **not** safe if you hope to escape the pain of the world in this beautiful sanctuary, because Jesus will always lead us out to the harvest work of justice and peace. Yes, it **is** safe, because trusting this dusty Messiah, who knows thirst and pain and sacrifice, leads us to a deeper understanding of our own vulnerability and how we may find comfort. No, it is **not** safe if you only seek your own spiritual comfort, because the bonds of community will always draw you into dangerous waters of dialogue and disagreement. Yes, it **is** safe, because the conversation with Jesus will bring us to meet the “other,” and Samaritans and Jews will rejoice to feast together in the presence of our beloved Rabbi, prophet, Messiah and Savior of the world.

Leave the secure nighttime visit of Nicodemus behind. Join the woman at the well as she encounters Jesus in the bright light of high noon. Through the eyes of Jesus she is able to see herself in a new light. May we find the grace to do the same. Amen.