

## *Codependency*

The Third Sunday in Lent

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First Congregational UCC, Eagle River, Wisconsin

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Text: John 4:5-42

She brought her bucket to this well every day at noon. It was a pretty famous well. Abraham had sworn a covenant with God at this well, and local legend had it that Abraham's grandson Jacob had met his wife Rachel there, which is why they called it "Jacob's Well." Both her people, the Samaritans, and the Jews, who despised the Samaritans, considered the well to be a sacred place. But for her it was also just a place to get water in harsh and dry territory.

Except for a few months of the year, it was always hot at noon at the well, often unbearably so. But she couldn't come early in the day when it was cooler because the other women would be there, and it was, to say the least, awkward. The other women avoided her. She had had five husbands, and was living with a sixth partner. Who knows? Perhaps she had been married five times because five times she had failed to produce male children, and her disappointed husbands had divorced her. They could do that. Perhaps she was considered to be bad luck by her neighbors, and they feared that her bad luck would rub off on them. So she chose to avoid the embarrassment of being shunned by the other women and came to the well at the hottest time of day because she knew no one else would be there.

So unlike Nicodemus, who came to Jesus under the cloak of darkness, she met Jesus in the full noontime sunlight. There he was, just sitting there. She could tell from his

clothing that he was a Jew, and that was not good news. He was double trouble, first because he was a he, and men and women who were strangers to one another were not supposed to converse; and secondly because he was one of *them*. Jews looked down on Samaritans, basically wished they didn't exist. The Jews worshipped on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem; the Samaritans on Mt. Gerezim, near Shechem, the place the Romans had renamed Neapolis, the new city, today's West Bank city of Nablus. Actually a tiny community of Samaritans still live near Nablus and are represented in the Palestinian Parliament. Both Jews and Samaritans believed in one God, the God whose will had been made known through the same set of prophets, but they each believed that God was particular about the mountain on which God should be worshipped. She knew that the religious people took such things very seriously.

But the guy really did seem to insist on talking to her. What kind of Jew was this, who talked to a woman and a Samaritan at that? He said he was thirsty. Could she give him some water? Well, what was he thinking? He didn't even have a bucket, and didn't he know that no Jew would drink from a bucket or a ladle that had been contaminated by a Samaritan?

"How come you, a Jewish man, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink of water? Don't you know the rules?" she asked. He said, "If you really knew who I am, you wouldn't be surprised by my request. In fact, the water in this well is stale dead water that you, your ancestors, and my ancestors have been drawing on for centuries. So actually, you're the one who ought to be asking me for water, but for living water, water whose freshness would take your breath away; water that's so abundant that you don't even have to lower your bucket for it."

"So, what you're saying is that your water is better than Jacob's water, that you're greater than Jacob, even though he's the one who blessed this well, and even though this well has provided water for countless generations ever since." "No, what I'm saying is that no

matter who dug this well or who prayed over it, the water you get from it is just plain old water. I'm offering you something different; I'm offering water that will cleanse your soul, and give you not just a better life, but a new life. You see, it's dead, still water that has kept our old feuds going, that has somehow convinced us that where and how we worship, or what we call ourselves is the least bit important. If you drink this living water, all those distinctions will drop away and you and I can focus on what's really important. We can look at each other not as man and woman, or as Jew and Samaritan, but as people who carry within us God's spirit and who bear God's image. If you get to know me, you'll get to know the God who is within you."

"I think I want some of this water," she said. "Well, why don't you go back and get your husband, and bring him here and you can both have the living water I'm offering?"

"Well, um, that's a little complicated." "Oh, I know it's complicated. You've had five husbands already, and the guy you're with now may not choose to be number six. But that doesn't matter. The water I'm offering you will wash away all the bad things that have been done to you and all the bad things you have done. You see, God doesn't love you despite who you are, or despite what you've done, or what has been done to you. God loves you because you are who you are, God's child. And you should never try to keep secrets from someone who wants desperately to love you and to be loved by you. God loves you because God knows you like a mother knows her child; God loves you because you satisfy God's thirst to save. That's why God chose to live within you, to come to you in me: not to condemn you, not to keep drawing on the dead water of judgment and condemnation, but to offer you the living fresh water that will make you whole, the water of salvation."

Meanwhile, Jesus' disciples arrived. They'd gone off looking for food. When they saw that Jesus was speaking with a woman, and a Samaritan at that, they said to one another, "What's he gone and done now?" Just when they thought he had pushed the envelope

about as far as it would go, and definitely farther than it should go, Jesus seemed to have found a new way to upset people's expectations. This had to stop or tongues would wag, and they, known to be Jesus' disciples, would have a lot of explaining to do.

But as the disciples were arriving, the Samaritan woman threw her bucket off to the wayside and headed back into the city. She didn't need that bucket anymore because she didn't need the stale, dead water it carried. She didn't need all the judgment and guilt of that old water. She didn't need her lifeless old religion because she had encountered living faith, living and breathing faith. "Come and see a man who sees me in a way no one has ever seen me. He told me everything I ever did. You don't think he could be the Messiah, do you?"

The Gospel of John doesn't give the woman at the well a name, but because the early church considered her to be the first evangelist, the first person who testified that she had met the Messiah, the early church gave her a name. They called her St. Photina, which means, "the bearer of light." Because of her testimony, the people of Neapolis went out and invited Jesus into the city to stay with them. He stayed two days, and because they heard him with their own ears, their lives were changed.

It all started with two thirsty people, one thirsting to save and the other thirsty for new life, abundant life, eternal life. These two people needed each other. In a sense they were dependent on each other.

Sounds almost heretical, doesn't it—the idea that God needs us as much as we need God. After all, people usually came to Jesus with their pleas, like Nicodemus who came to Jesus in the night, looking for enlightenment. It always seems to be a one-way process: we need God and God responds. But God reaches out to us because God needs to save us. It's who God is. It's why God insisted that his son be named, Jesus, "the one who saves;" because when God stops saving, God stops being God. So when the Law and the

Prophets weren't sufficient testimony to God's need to save, God became human. God preached the most eloquent sermon ever delivered, at least as far as we followers of Jesus are concerned. God preached the sermon of a life lived, a death died, and life made eternal.

We're all thirsty. We all look for the water that will satisfy our relentless quest for what will satisfy our thirst, for what will bring meaning into our lives. Here's God's invitation, as Isaiah gave it. "If you are thirsty come to the waters; if you don't have money, come and buy and eat. Buy wine and milk that you can't buy with money, food that is priceless. Listen to God so that you will live. Seek the Lord while he may be found."

Don't waste your time, don't spend your effort on the stale dead water of old hatreds, of unfulfilled desires, of lifeless religion. Turn to God; receive the water of life. God knows everything about you, and even, and especially knowing what God knows, God loves you.

We need God, and God needs us. That's the drama of Lent, the meaning of redemption. The Lenten story is the story of a God who needs us as much as we need her, a God whose very nature it is to save, to bring light and life. It's the mutual dependency of the lover and the one who is loved: when the relationship is right, the roles are interchangeable. The poet John Donne put it this way, "There we leave you in that blessed dependency, to hang upon him who hangs upon the cross."

We and God are co-dependent. Blessedly so.

So, come to the water of life. Find God and find yourself. Amen.

