

John 4:5-42 (NRSV)

So he 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.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But 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." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

This Gospel lesson tells a kind of a love story. From the context the ancient audience, the first hearers of John's Gospel might expect this to **be** a love story. The text reminds us that this was Jacob's well, certainly the audience of the Gospel would remember that Jacob met Rachel at the well, that Isaac's future wife Rebekah met Abraham's servant at the well, and came home with him to meet Isaac. Conversations at the town's well between men and women who don't know each other frequently turn out to be love stories in the Bible.

So there's a tension that underlies the story, from its very beginning. The conversation feels like a dance, each partner circling the other. The woman is wary, the man insistent.

Jesus, without any introduction, asks her for a drink, and, not surprisingly, she rebuffs him. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Judeans thought that Samaritans worshipped in the wrong place and in the wrong way – 150 years before, the Judean king John Hyrcanus had pulled down the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim. Samaritans had good cause to be a bit cautious among Judeans.

Jesus replies – if you knew how generous God is, if you knew who I am, you might ask me and I would give you living water. This conversation, this dance, relies on double meanings – in this case, living water might mean free-flowing water from a spring rather than from a well. Or it might mean just what he said, the water of life.

She is a bit intrigued, but also a bit impatient with this strange-talking man. After all, he came to her for a drink because he had no bucket or water jar. How is he going to give her water? Is he greater than Jacob, the father of Israel and Samaria?

We smile. Well, yes he is, we think. But she doesn't know that. Not yet. The dance continues. Jesus tells her that the water from this well will leave you thirsting again – the living water I give will gush up to eternal life. She surprises us. Sir, she says, or is it Lord? It's the same word either way. Sir, she says, give me this water, that's what I want, I'm sure tired of coming to get this water every day.

He says, Call your husband and come back. We don't really know why he says this. She squares her shoulders and says, "I have no husband." He says, in effect, you've got that right – you've had five husbands and the guy you're living with now isn't one of them.

Now, there's been a lot of ink spilled over what a great sinner she must be, but there isn't any reason to think that the number of husbands she's had reflects on her at all. Recall a few weeks ago, the Pharisees asking Jesus about the woman who'd been married seven times, who would be her husband after the resurrection? Certainly Jesus gives no indication that she's blameworthy. No more a sinner than any of us. And no less.

In any case, she moves back a step in the dance – you must be a prophet, she says, probably sarcastically, because her next comment reminds him of their differences – you Judeans, she says, tell us we have to worship not on Mount Gerizim, but in Jerusalem. This is the main source of the difficulty between the Samaritans and the Judeans. He moves forward a step in the dance – the hour is coming, he says, when the "where" of worship will be less important than the "how" and the "who," because God seeks worshippers and worship in spirit and truth. True worship isn't in a particular place, but rather is reliance on a particular Truth, the Lordship of the Son of God.

She dodges – I'll know all the answers when the Messiah comes, she says. And Jesus replies – I am he. This is the first time in John's Gospel that Jesus actually says he is the Messiah. Maybe her honesty has prompted him to be honest in return. We don't know what the woman might have said in response, because the disciples arrive. They are astonished that he is talking with a woman, so astonished they don't even ask what they've been talking about. The woman departs, and leaves her water jar – she apparently didn't need the water from the well anymore. But she goes to tell the whole city about this strange-talking stranger who told her everything she had ever done.

Is this how discipleship happens? Through honesty? Through knowing and being known? Through people talking, really talking, about what they've done and what they need and what they hope for? In our Soup and Study class, we've been talking a little bit about how people grow in faith. One way is to teach, because when we teach, we have to assemble what we know or think we know, and say it in our own words, the way the woman at the well did. Another way is through things like work camp, or VBS where we work and play alongside others with whom we share a task, a community, a faith. Discipleship comes through people we trust, people we value and who value us. Discipleship is all about relationship.

How often it is that we keep looking for the same water even though we know it will leave us thirsty again? The water of the world's praise, the world's rewards of money or status or regard, even though we know that the more we get the more we will need. The problem, of course, is that the world doesn't ask us what we need – it's glad to tell us what we need. The world's message is so powerful that it takes a powerful voice, a powerful word and powerful relationships to overcome it.

What the woman at the well needed was a somewhat pushy and insistent stranger who wouldn't be dismissed or denied or pushed away, who listened for the truth and who told her the truth as well, who knew her and allowed himself to be known by her. She needed a dance partner.

So, in the end, this *is* a kind of a love story, a story about God's love for a woman at a well and for us. A love story about God's endless pursuit of us, God's dance with us, we who are like the woman at the well, often looking for the wrong kinds of nourishment in the wrong places even though we know better. It can be a love story for us for our life together here as we support and correct and remind one another of what is really important. And it can be a love story for the world when we go out to tell everyone about this strange-talking stranger whom we know and who knows us, knows everything about us and everything we've ever done and loves us anyway.

Let me conclude by thanking the congregation for keeping Linda and me in your prayers as Linda's mom, Joann makes her final journey in this life. We have always felt the love of this congregation, but never more than now. Thank you all.

Amen.