

Sermon by Rev. Allison J. Beaulieu
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
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In God We Thirst

The story of the Samaritan woman always reminds me of another famous story about a well. It was 1987. I was 10 years old. I had just come home from school to find my mom glued to the TV. It was like she was transfixed by what she was watching. I immediately thought it must be a pretty good episode of General Hospital. (That's a soap opera for those of you who don't watch daytime TV.) But, she wasn't watching General Hospital, or any other soap opera for that matter. She was watching breaking news from Midland, TX where an 18 month old baby girl named Jessica had fallen down a well. When my mom filled me in, I joined her on the couch and immediately the story grabbed my attention. They kept showing live footage from the well where workers in hard hats maneuvered drills and other pieces of heavy equipment at an attempt to break through to her. The real scare was whether baby Jessica had enough air to survive. They were also worried that she might have life threatening injuries from falling so far down the well. Later on that night, still glued to the TV, we watched as rescue workers piped in oxygen and heat to keep Jessica warm through the night. My parents had to pry me away from the television that night. I remember listening to the TV from my bedroom waiting so see if Jessica had made it out of the well. I fell asleep that night with a heavy heart. In the morning, all the TV stations were still focused on the events in Midland, TX. In fact, for two full days all we saw on TV was the scene of the accident and rescue efforts continuing without so much as a break. We prayed. We held vigils. We kept hope alive. We watched and waited. And then, we were told that an effort to build a parallel tunnel down to Jessica was a success. A man in an orange hat, with all kinds of gear was slowly lowered into that parallel tunnel. After he disappeared, our eyes focused on that line attached to him. We watched as it was lowered, lowered, lowered. Would he be able to reach her? And would she still be alive? Our questions were about to be answered as we saw the line that had been lowered now being pulled up by a team of workers. First we saw that orange hat and then we saw the man's face and in his arms he was holding something. When we looked closer, we saw that it was baby Jessica wrapped in gauze

and strapped to a backboard. She blinked her eyes and we could see that indeed she was still alive. That image still sticks in my mind—seeing that little baby, all bruised and dirty, emerge from the well that held her captive. It was one of the most beautiful images I have ever seen.

In today's scripture we meet another woman at the well—the famous (Or should I say “infamous”?) Samaritan woman. I want to say infamous because I know what line stuck out to you. It's the same line that stuck out to me. Jesus asks her to call her husband and come back. She answers him saying “I have no husband.” Jesus responds, “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.” FIVE husbands, can you imagine that? That's almost as many husbands as Elizabeth Taylor had! It is important for us to resist the temptation to write this woman off as a sinner with serious moral laxity. When we hear that she has five husbands and the one she is living with now is not her husband, we tend to write her off as an adulterer. Thus through our modern day lenses, we stereotype her and she becomes nothing more than a woman with some serious relationship problems. But, we cannot project our modern day ideas on a person who lived in a different time and culture. In fact, many interpreters of this passage suggest that this woman was caught in a “levirate” marriage as described in Deuteronomy 25. In this type of marriage, if a woman's husband dies and she has no son, she must be married to her husband's brother. Therefore, she could have been a widow five times over and the brother that she is with now refuses to marry her or the marriage has not yet been made official. This cultural context puts her in a little different light, doesn't it? She becomes less of a sinner and more of a victim (a victim of a patriarchal society that views women as mere property). She deserves less condemnation and more compassion. Isn't it interesting how our perception can change once we take the time to learn a few more details?

Jesus reacts starkly different to the woman than the reader does and I think it is in those opposite reactions where the teaching moment lies. Whereas we initially want to demonize this woman who we perceive as morally deficient, Jesus embraces her. Not only does Jesus extend his hand to a foreigner (as we are told that Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans), but he teaches her. And not only does he teach her, he reveals to this woman who he is. The gospel of John includes a variety of “I am” statements from the mouth of Jesus. This is the first instance of such statements: verse 26

when Jesus says, “I am he, the one who is speaking with you.” Thus, this being the first of Jesus’ self-revelation statements, it is indicative of the uniqueness of this woman. In Jesus’ eyes, this woman is not a sinner, or a Samaritan, or a woman he should not be talking to. In Jesus’ eyes, this is a child of God standing before him who is worthy of the secret knowledge he holds. You see, it is a matter of seeing. He sees her as she is, and because of that she sees him.

Jesus sees through this woman. Anna Carter Florence, a renowned lecturer and preacher, writes; “He (Jesus) sees through her tough exterior. He sees everything she’s ever done, and he sees beyond it, too. He sees everything she’s ever tried to be— everything she’s ever had to do, to survive. Everything she’s ever dreamed she might be, if things were different. He sees her, and loves her, in spite of her.”¹ Jesus sees right through to the core of this woman. He gets a glimpse of her soul. Unlike modern day readers who are quick to condemn this woman and put her in a box, Jesus is compassionate and non-judgmental.

Sue Monk Kidd gives us this brilliant illustration:

Rabbi Joseph Liebermann told how he fell asleep one night and had a dream. In the dream he dies and goes to stand before the judgment seat of God. As he waits for God to speak, he fears that the Lord will ask him “Why weren’t you a Moses...or a David...or a Solomon?” But God surprises him. He simply asks, “Why weren’t you Joseph Liebermann?” When my life is over, I doubt God will ask me why I wasn’t a Mother Theresa. The question I fear most is, “Why weren’t you Sue Monk Kidd?” The most gracious and courageous gift we can offer the world is our authenticity, our uniqueness (and) the expression of our true selves.²

Jesus accepts us for who we truly are. He accepts the Samaritan woman for who she is, not who she might be trying to be. He “gets” her. How many people have taken the time to really “get” you?

Many of you know that my parents and grandfather were in town last weekend for my grandfather’s birthday. Well, in talking with my mom privately, I learned that my dad was struggling with making a decision about returning to coach another two years of

¹ Anna Carter Florence, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Volume XIX, Number 2, 33.

² Sue Monk Kidd, **Firstlight: The Early Inspirational Writings**, 176.

high school cross country. I asked my mom, "What do you think dad will choose." And without hesitation she said, "Oh, I think he'll do it. He's not ready to give it up yet." So, the next day at lunch, my dad says he has an announcement to make. After much thought and prayer, he has decided to coach cross country for another two years. He looked at me with an expression like, "Didn't I surprise you with that one?" I just smiled and said, "That's what mom thought." He just kind of chuckled after that. The thing that amazes me about my parents is how well they know each other. Sometimes they know each other better than they know themselves. They get each other. It's unfortunate that in this fast-paced world, we don't take the time to get one another or to connect. We may know a little bit about someone and then simply fill in the blanks with stereotypes and conjectures, just like we did with the woman at the well. But that's not what Jesus did to her and that's not what he does with us.

In Henri Nouwen's book, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*, he includes his own original parable. This is called "The Rabbi and the Fugitive."

One day a young fugitive, trying to hide himself from the enemy, entered a small village. The people were kind to him and offered him a place to stay. But when the soldiers who sought the fugitive asked where he was hiding, everyone became very fearful. The soldiers threatened to burn the village and kill every person in it, unless the young man was handed over to them before dawn. The people went to the Rabbi and asked him what to do. Torn between handing over the boy to the enemy and having his people killed, the Rabbi withdrew to his room and read his Bible, hoping to find an answer before dawn. In the early morning his eyes fell on these words: "It is better that one man dies than that the whole people be lost."

Then the Rabbi closed the Bible, called the soldiers, and told them where the boy was hidden. And after the soldiers led the fugitive away to be killed, there was a feast in the village because the Rabbi had saved the lives of the people. But the Rabbi did not celebrate. Overcome with a deep sadness, he remained in his room. That night an angel came to him and asked, "What have you done?" He said: "I have handed over the fugitive to the enemy." Then the angel said: "But don't you know that you have handed over the Messiah?" How could I know?" the Rabbi replied anxiously. Then the angel said: "If, instead of reading your Bible, you had visited this young man just once and looked into his eyes, you would have known."

Nouwen continues, “Are we not challenged in daily life to look deeper into the eyes of the people we encounter - even those who are running away from something - and to see in them the face of God? Perhaps just knowing that they, too, are beloved children of God will be enough to prevent us from handing them over to the enemy. Are we not also challenged and encouraged to look more deeply at the way God sees us - beloved, accepted, affirmed, and worthy of salvation? Are we, like the fugitive, reflections of the Messiah?”³

The story of the Samaritan woman challenges us to see each other the way God sees us—to see past the barriers that seek to divide. We are equally challenged by this story to look more closely at what God sees when God looks into our hearts. If we are confident that God sees who we truly are, not who we are trying to be and loves us in spite of it, maybe we can learn to accept ourselves. And then, who knows, maybe we will be able to accept others with the same love and understanding that God gives to us. We need to take a daily journey with our water jars to that well, where Jesus reveals himself to us and fills us with living water. That’s the water we must use to wash our eyes and see with perfect vision our brothers and sisters in Christ.

It is now 20 years since baby Jessica fell down the well. For 20 years she refused to talk to the press about what happened to her. She recently broke her silence and granted an interview to Matt Lauer on the Today show. In the interview she refers to a scar that she has on her forehead, the largest of the scars that linger from her ordeal. She said, “That scar tells me who I am”. “Come and see the man who told me everything I have ever done.” She’s not the first one who walked away from a well knowing herself more fully, more deeply. Neither will she be the last. Amen.

³ Henri Nouwen, **Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith**, 26-27.