

## ***“Wish Them Well”***

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John 4: 5 – 42 NRSV

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*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 labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.” 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 Saviour of the world.”*

My wife watches a lot of cooking shows. A lot of these shows are competitions. And a lot of them involve cakes. If you get the Food Network, you know this. So many cake competitions. Many of them seasonal – Hallowe'en Baking Championship. Holiday Baking. Very elaborate cakes. As a minister I have seen quite a few wedding cakes, and none have been as over the top as the ones on TV.

Anyway, the connection with cake – other than that I like cake, I'm hoping there is cake later – a few weeks ago I was called to lead the worship service in Athens, and it was the one Sunday a month they celebrate birthdays, very nice, and as worship leader I had to stand beside the table with the cake on it, for an hour. That day's scripture should have been Jesus being tempted.

So the connection with cake is this gives me an excuse to tell a story about today's scripture reading from John's Gospel. A cake decorator was asked by a bride to inscribe the words from I John 4:18 on a wedding cake: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." Unfortunately, the decorator made a mistake. Instead of putting the words from I John 4:18 on the cake, the decorator wrote the words from the John 4:18, which we just heard: "You have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband."

This verse which the decorator mistakenly put on this wedding cake plays an important role in our gospel passage. You may have gathered from the gospels that in the time of Jesus women were not full members of society, that they were excluded and controlled in many ways, and a woman who had been married five times and was now living with, not married to, yet another man would not have been held in high esteem by her neighbours in her small village, including by the other women.

The fact that she is shunned by society is evident in the gospel account. First of all, the hour was about noon. It was considered a woman's task to draw the water for the household and most women would do so at dawn or soon after before the heat of the day set in. So the woman in the story – we are never told her name, she is just "the Samaritan woman" – was not welcome to join the other women of the village around the well, and she went at a time when no one else would be there.

Even more revealing is the fact that Jacob's well, where the gospel story takes place, is a kilometer from the village of Shechem where this woman was from, and there was probably a well closer to the village. So this woman avoided contact with other women not only by going to the well at a different time of the day from the others, but even to a more remote well to draw her water. It is plain that she is not considered respectable. She is ostracized by her society.

What also makes this conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus all the more amazing is just that: the fact that Jesus speaks to a Samaritan woman. Samaritans practiced a religion like Judaism, but not quite, and that's mentioned in this story, and they were ethnically different from

Jews, so this woman is a foreigner, considered hostile to Jews like Jesus. The animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans went back centuries, and this hostility had not diminished one bit by the time of Jesus. Just remember a story Jesus tells about the person you would least expect to stop and help a Jew beaten and robbed on the road - the good Samaritan. John notes that "Jews will not use the same cups and bowls that Samaritans use." Samaritans were considered unclean. And Jesus is asking this Samaritan, and a woman at that, for a drink!

The Gospel says that Jesus and his followers are only in Samaria taking a short cut on their travels. Jews normally avoided the whole area as the Samaritans had made the land impure. And even more revealing is the fact that Jesus lived in a society where men and women unrelated to each other didn't engage in casual conversations in public. So here is this dialogue between Jesus and a woman who has three strikes against her: she is a Samaritan, a woman, and not just any woman, but a woman with a bad reputation. This is a conversation Jesus should never be in.

So when this woman arrives at the well and Jesus is there alone, I'm sure that she thinks, oh no, this is not good. He's an enemy, he's a man, lots can go wrong here. But Jesus defies convention. He crosses boundaries. He even surprises his scandalized followers. He speaks to this foreign, outcast woman he has never met before. When she asks him about Jerusalem being the only place where Jews worship God, Jesus replies, "Believe me, woman, the time will come when people will not worship the Father either on this mountain or in Jerusalem." The word "woman" is significant here. Now, it sounds somewhat harsh, or dismissive, to us in English. "Believe me, woman." But the original Greek word – I took Greek for two years, I finally get to bring this out – the Greek word here, woman, is actually much softer. It's a term of endearment. One commentator says it's the equivalent of saying "special lady".

Think of it: this woman is not just a foreigner, she can't even associate with the other women because of her shame. Yet Jesus, seeing the possibilities in her, calls her "special lady"! He uses the same word for this woman that he uses to address his mother, elsewhere in John's Gospel. Amazing. A woman, an enemy, a sinner, and yet Jesus calls her a special lady and offers her the water of life.

But there is even more: she is the first person in John's Gospel to whom Jesus reveals his true identity. She says – this is verse 25 - "I know that the Messiah will come, and when he comes, he will tell us everything." And Jesus tells her "I am he, I who am talking with you." In the original Greek the words of Jesus, I am he, mean the same thing as the name of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, if you think back to the book of Exodus, as God says to Moses, "I am who I am."

So here is a Samaritan woman, an outcast, even from her own community, excluded for her gender, her religion, her ethnicity, her lifestyle, the last person Jesus should have anything to do with - yet he confides his

innermost secret in her. This encounter with Jesus changes her life, for immediately she goes and, overcoming her own fear and lack of standing in the community, brings many in her village to believe in him. There is a legend that she became a convert to the Christian faith and took the name "Photini", which means "enlightened one" at her baptism. It was Jesus believing in her goodness and possibility that changed her life. His love transformed an outsider with a checkered past into a future saint of the church.

Knowing all this, we can move on to the next part of our analysis of this reading, our exegesis, to use a fancy church word.

The sermon title today is Wish Them Well, which is the name of a song by the Canadian rock band Rush. It's off the Clockwork Angels album, if you're a Rush fan. Cathie needed a sermon title, and I was pressed for time, and I sometimes use songs for sermon titles and this was the only one I could think of that had Well in it, for the well in the gospel story. That's the way my mind works.

But the Holy Spirit blows where it will, and when I thought about the song after sending in the title, the lyrics speak to what we're talking about, what John was talking about. This Rush song says: Spirits turned bitter by the poison of envy. Always angry and dissatisfied. People who judge without a measure of mercy. Does this sound familiar? Do the Rush lyrics describe any situations we have heard about, we know about?

Who are the Samaritan women of today? Who does our society ostracize? Who do we have long-standing hostilities with, who do we avoid, who would we never be seen speaking with in public? Who do we judge, do we make assumptions about and point fingers at? Who from a different race or ethnic group or religion or sexual orientation or background than ours would we rather just talk about and never have to talk with? Who in our neighbourhood or our family or our society is the subject of scandal and shame and shunning?

The question for us today is this: Are we agents of transformation in the lives of others, or do we go around undermining, spreading rumours, gossiping and otherwise putting other people down? Are we the people who judge without a measure of mercy that Rush sang about? We are challenged on a daily basis in our homes, in our work places and in our encounters with others throughout our lives to see people as Jesus sees them: not as our enemies or as too shameful to be redeemed, but as men and women, imperfect like us, whom God loves without limit.

And, you know, sometimes, we even need to see that in ourselves. Maybe, just maybe, we are the Samaritan woman. Perhaps we know exclusion. We believe that we are unworthy, shameful, even despicable. And when we get to the well we find Jesus, meeting us in our loneliest place. And he offers us living water. And we, like the woman of Samaria, are transformed. That can be us, for that spiritual water that Jesus will give us will become in us a spring which will give us eternal life. Thanks be to God.