March 23, 2014

John 4:5-42   
*The Answer*

Rev. Kerry Smith   
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

**Readers’ Theater: THE WOMAN AT THE WELL**

**Narrator**: Jesus 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.

**Jesus**: Give me a drink.

**Woman**: How is it that you, a Jew, are asking a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?

**Jesus**: 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.

**Woman**: Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where will you get the living water? This is the well of our ancestor Jacob. Are you greater than Jacob?

**Jesus**: 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.

**Woman**: Sir, give me this water so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.

**Jesus**: Go, and call your husband and come back.

**Woman**: I have no husband.

**Jesus**: You have told the truth. You have had five husbands and the one you now have is not your husband.

**Woman**: You must be a prophet! I have a question for you. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.

**Jesus**: Believe me, the time 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.

**Woman**: I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.

**Jesus**: I am he, the one who is speaking to you.

**Narrator**: Just then his disciples, who had gone into town to get some food, returned to Jesus and were astonished that he was having a conversation with the woman. The woman left her water jar and went back to the city to tell the people to come and see a man who had told her everything that she had ever done. And the people came back with her to the well. The disciples meanwhile tried to encourage Jesus to have something to eat, but he replied to their queries

**Jesus**: 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.

**Narrator**: Many of the Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony. 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.”

It was 3 o’clock on a hot August day and the sweat was dripping from my forehead. My mouth was dry and thirsty and I could feel the heat of the burning sun. I tried to get the lawnmower to start with one more tug and this time the engine finally caught. I made circles in the lawn with the lawnmower and pretty soon I could feel that my clothes were soaked with sweat. I was wishing for a rainstorm or a swimming pool that I could jump into. And all I could think of was a big drink of water. Can you imagine it?

Have you ever been thirsty? Really thirsty? Jesus and the Samaritan woman are thirsty. And we hear this conversation where Jesus says he has the capacity to offer streams of water that well up to eternal life so that we will never thirst again. We experience thirst of all sorts. Do you recognize when you are thirsty? Have you ever wandered in the desert and not known if or when you will arrive at your destination? When you are thirsty how do you drink from the living water?

Do you notice that Jesus does not call the Samaritan woman to repent? Jesus does not speak of sin at all, but instead calls her to life-giving faith. All that we know of the Samaritan woman is that she has had five husbands and the one she has now is not her husband. She very easily could have been widowed or abandoned or divorced. Five times would be heartbreaking, but not impossible. She could also now be living with someone that she was dependent on, or be in what’s called a levirate marriage where a childless woman is married to her deceased husband’s brother in order to produce an heir yet is not always technically considered the brother’s wife. There are any number of ways that we might imagine this woman’s story as tragic rather than scandalous.

After Jesus describes the woman’s past, she responds, “You must be a prophet” and she asks Jesus where she should worship. Now if you are thinking the worst of the Samaritan woman, you might think she is trying to change the topic. But if you can imagine another scenario, things look different. In the Gospel of John, “seeing” is an important theological activity. “To see” is often connected with belief. When the woman says, “I see you are a prophet,” she is not changing the subject but instead making a confession of faith.

She is making a confession of faith because Jesus has “seen” her. Jesus has seen her plight of dependence, he has recognized her, spoken with her, offered her something of incomparable worth. Jesus has seen her. She has worth, value, significance, and all of this is treatment to which she is unaccustomed. Jesus speaks of her past with knowledge and compassion, and she realizes that she is in the presence of a prophet.

Being seen is a powerful thing.  To know that another human being has truly seen you, understood you, received you for who you really are that is pure grace.  Being seen.  Human beings long for communion, for deep connection.  When we don’t have it, we literally waste away from isolation, anger, depression, addiction. Being seen means coming clean about our brokenness.  It means telling the truth about everything we’ve ever done.  It means believing that we are more than our deeds and misdeeds; we are also the possibility of a new creation, in Christ.  Being seen means that we are known, and loved, and forgiven.  It is pure grace; simply miraculous.

I remember when I first felt like I really saw my husband, Lee. We were in college in San Antonio walking around downtown. We were standing by a waterfall and I can’t remember who asked the question, but I remember our answers. The question was what do you want out of life. My answer was success, to be important, to make a mark, to change the world. But the reason why I wanted to be successful was because then I felt like I would be loved. Then I would be worthy of love. And Lee’s answer, well, his answer is the reason why I married him many years later. What did Lee want out of life? To be happy. One of my favorite Bible verses is 2 Corinthians 5:17, “So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!” I can be happy today because I am a new creation in Christ. It is pure grace.

The Samaritan woman has everything stacked against her. She is a Samaritan in this Jewish story, a woman in a male-dominated world, who has lived a challenging and probably tragic life, and is very likely dependent on others. She has no means to gain dignity or community. Yet Jesus speaks to her and offers his living water, a relationship with God that restores her to dignity and community. And after her encounter with Jesus she goes to live a new life and to share with others what God has done for her.

Do you ever feel like the task is monumental and you do not have the means to accomplish it? Ever faced a situation that exceeds your human abilities alone to address? Maybe you have just been given more responsibility at work and no pay increase and you wonder how you are possibly going to be able to fulfill these obligations. Maybe a loved one is struggling with an addiction and you feel helpless in the face of its power over them. Or we think about the suffering of people in our own communities, children enduring abuse, people without healthcare, the homeless who live a hidden existence. The task is monumental and we do not have the means to accomplish it.

Praise God, Jesus always stands beside us. Jesus sits by the deepest well. Jesus places himself at our side in the most monumental tasks and the most hopeless situations. Jesus is the living water, the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate, the Good Shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth and the life, and the true vine. And Jesus is right next to us, in the heat of the day and at the height of our fatigue. Our spiritual sustenance is around us and within us and available in each moment.

I wonder what holds us back from living into the future God has prepared for us? What prevents us from sharing the good news of what God has done in our lives? What past tragedies or present challenges do we need to trade for the living water Jesus offers? Maybe it is a dead-end job or the difficulty of finding one. Maybe it is an unfulfilling relationship or no relationship at all. Maybe it is a past wound or fear about the future. Maybe it is an illness of the mind, body, or spirit. Maybe it is grief or anxiety or guilt or sadness. What do you struggle with? I struggle with if I’m good enough. I compare myself to others. God wants only good things for me and for you, but we have a hard time accepting God’s gifts and being the people God has called us to be. God has created me. I am good enough. I don’t need to compare myself to others. I am fine just the way God made me. May God help us let go of those things that hold us back, and may we be reminded of God’s unfailing love for us. May God create in us the hope and courage to drink the living water Jesus offers as we live into the future.

The great preacher Fred Craddock tells the story of his father, who spent years of his life hiding from the God who was seeking him out. Fred’s mother would bring Fred to church and Sunday School but his father never went. When Fred and his mom got home his father would complain about Sunday dinner being late. The pastor would come to call on Fred’s dad, and his father would say, ‘You don’t care about me. I know how churches are. You want another pledge, another name, right? Another name, another pledge, isn’t that the whole point of church? Get another name, another pledge.’ Fred’s mother would run to the kitchen, crying, for fear that somebody’s feelings would be hurt. “You don’t care about me. I know how churches are. You want another pledge, another name, right? Another name, another pledge, isn’t that the whole point of church? Get another name, another pledge.” Fred guessed that he heard his dad say that a thousand times. But there was one time that he didn’t say it. He was at the Veteran’s Hospital and he was down to 74 pounds. They had taken out his dad’s throat, put in a metal tube, and said, ‘Mr. Craddock, you should have come earlier. This cancer is awfully far advanced. We’ll give radium, but we don’t know.’ Fred went in to see his dad and in every window there were potted plants and flowers. Everywhere there was a place to set them, potted plants and flowers. Even on that tray swings out over your bed and they put food on, there was a big flower. There was by his bed a stack of cards 10 or 15 inches deep. Fred looked at the cards sprinkled in the flowers. Fred read the cards beside his dad’s bed. And every card, every blossom, every potted plant was from groups, Sunday School classes, women’s groups, youth groups, men’s bible classes, of Fred’s mother’s church. Every one of them. Fred’s father saw him reading the cards. He could not speak, but he took a Kleenex box and wrote something on the side from Shakespeare’s Hamlet. He wrote on the side, “In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.” Fred asked, ‘What is your story, Daddy?’ And Fred’s dad wrote, ‘I was wrong.’” It is not until you know God is seeking you in love, not in condemnation; it is not until that moment that the gospel becomes Good News for you.

When the Samaritan woman shares the story of her experience with Jesus she does so at first rather tentatively. She says to her neighbors, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done. He can’t be the Messiah, can he?” And the neighbors go to meet Jesus for themselves. He can’t be the Messiah, can he? As she steps away from her past into a future she could not have imagined, she does so tentatively. We too may not trust that God knows our challenges or can change them. As we pray and as we gain practice in handing over our difficulties to Jesus, we also grow in faith and confidence. He can’t be the Messiah, can he? As Pumba and Timon say in “The Lion King,” you have to put your behind in the past. You have to put your past behind you. May we leave our past and join the woman at the well in telling others what God has done for us.

The woman at the well becomes a stream of living water, sharing the life she has found with all around her, so that others come to believe and become such streams for others. May the Samaritan woman's prayer be our prayer: "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water"(4:15). Praise God it is a prayer that has been answered before it is even uttered.