***“Living Water”***

**Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42**

**Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake**

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This past Wednesday, March 8th, was *International Women’s Day.* The United Nations recognized *International Women's Day* in 1977, but the occasion has its roots in labor movements of the early 20th century. The day is commemorated in different ways and to varying degrees in different countries.

For example, from demands for constitutional rights in *Islamabad* to calls for economic parity in *Manila, Paris, and Madrid*, International Women’s Day demonstrations in cities around the world Wednesday highlighted the unfinished work of providing equity for half of the planet’s population.

While activists in some places celebrated political and legal advances, observances also pointed to repression in countries such as *Afghanistan and Iran,* and the large numbers of women and girls who experience sexual assaults and domestic violence globally.

United Nations Secretary General *Antonio Guterres* noted this week that women’s rights were *“abused, threatened, and violated”* around the world and [gender equality won’t be achieved for *300 years*](https://apnews.com/article/un-gender-equality-womens-rights-c66860dda2e845b3ce27b536611d7814) given the current pace of change.

Progress won over decades is vanishing because *“the patriarchy is fighting back,”* Guterres said.

Even in countries where women have considerable freedom, there have been recent setbacks. For instance, this was the *first* International Women’s Day since the US Supreme Court [ended the constitutional right to abortion](https://apnews.com/article/abortion-supreme-court-decision-854f60302f21c2c35129e58cf8d8a7b0) last year and many states adopted restrictions on abortion.[[1]](#footnote-1)

You know, throughout human history there has been a perennial war between men and women. Males have sometimes even held over females the power of life and death. For example, in Jesus’ day a man could divorce his wife simply by saying, *“I divorce you,”* in the presence of witnesses. The woman, on the other hand, could not escape a marriage no matter how cruel her husband might be, for she had few human rights.

In fact, some societies, reflecting the devaluing of the feminine, have encouraged widows to throw themselves on their husband’s flaming funeral pyre, for in those societies she has had no value except as her husband’s wife. Other societies have bound the feet of women so that their lack of mobility would make them easy to keep under constant surveillance.

Throughout most of Christian history men have been free to beat their wives, and women have been forced to promise obedience to their husbands as part of the marriage liturgies of Christian churches well into the twentieth—and even the twenty-first centuries.

Ask yourself: *What is the motivation for this inhumane behavior, which is still so deep a part of our cultural understanding of life?*

For most of Western history women have been relegated to second-class status, with the Christian church validating that definition as God-inspired and God-imposed. The result? In many times and places women have not been educated, been allowed to own property in their own name or been given the power of citizenship expressed through voting.

The problem is, (as in all human relationships), that one cannot be *fully human* if one must achieve power by diminishing another.  *Sexism* is one more humanity-robbing prejudice. Treating another human being as subhuman always makes the perpetrator subhuman. No one can finally be built up at someone else’s expense. It simply does not work.

Which brings us to our text this morning from John 4 where Jesus engaged the Samaritan woman at the well in conversation about theology, the nature of God and liturgy, and the proper way to worship God. He thus poured into her a *respect,* a *dignity* that called her into new dimensions of what it means to be human.[[2]](#footnote-2)

You see, to John’s original audience, this woman’s identity as a Samaritan is a source of tension. But Jesus subverts expectations and engages her. In fact, Jesus puts himself at her mercy by asking for a drink. The woman is shocked. Simply by speaking to her, Jesus crossed the two lines that should have kept them apart — Jew to Samaritan and religious teacher to a woman. Jesus, ever the rebel, is unphased by social barriers; his ministry of reconciliation, of breaking down barriers, exceeds social constructs.[[3]](#footnote-3)

So, Jesus was all about *wholeness.* As a result, he saw humanity from a new perspective. He believed that the humanity *in one person* could touch the humanity *in another* and *empower* that other to step out of the fears, tribal security systems, defining prejudices and other boundaries behind which human beings seek an elusive security.

That is one of the reasons why people saw what they called *God* in the human Jesus. His humanity opened his life into all that God means. Those who experienced Jesus experienced this new quality of life. They saw it, felt it, and claimed it. It is also the Jesus experience we seek.

So, when John wrote his gospel, he combined his understanding of what it meant to be a Samaritan *with* what it meant to be a woman, and in this manner brought a *double-dose* of gender issues and prejudices into focus *as another symbol* of the way self-centered, survival-oriented human beings deal with the trauma of being self-conscious and fearfully inadequate creatures.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Barbara Reid picks up on these themes in her wonderful book, titled: *Wisdom’s Feast: An Invitation to Feminist Interpretation of the Scriptures.* Understanding that the Bible can either *“reinforce sexism and violence toward women or [be] a powerful force for change,”* Reid interprets a variety of biblical passages from a feminist perspective (including John 4); (her) understanding (is) that feminism is *“committed to the humanity, dignity, and equality of all persons”* … (and) she also (addresses) *“inequalities based on race, culture, class, age, and ethnicity.”*

For example, Reid argues that the Samari­tan woman at the well functions as an *apostle* and *exemplary moral figure.* Like the other apostles, the Samari­tan woman *converts* many to believe in Jesus be­cause of her testimony (4:39).

Countering interpretations that regard the Samaritan woman as an *immoral social outcast,* Reid poignantly asks: *“If she were such a pariah, how is it that her townsfolk so readily listened to her and believed her word?”* Further, Reid observes that the Greek word often translated as *“testimony”* in this verse is logos, an overarching theme in the Gospel of John and a word used to refer to Jesus himself. Literarily, this word aligns the Samaritan woman with Jesus and positions her as a figure of truth and morality.

Reid also argues *against* interpretations that regard the Samaritan woman as a *sinner* being healed. She points out that Jesus *never* addresses or refers to the woman as such. Unlike several other passages in John where Jesus instructs people explicitly to stop sinning (e.g., 5:14, 8:11), Jesus doesn’t even insinuate that the woman is a sinner.

Furthermore, to those who use the textual reference to her *five husbands* as evidence of her sinfulness, Reid argues that the husbands are very likely an *allegory* for the five false gods of the Assyrians that Samaria adopted when they were conquered (2 Kings 17:13–34).

She keenly observes the wordplay on ba’al, which in Hebrew can mean both *“husband”* and *“Lord”* or *“God.”* She notes, *“When Jesus affirms that the one she has now is not her ‘husband,’ he is saying that Samaria is not espoused to the God of Israel, as they should be.”*

In fact, rather than addressing the woman’s *marital infidelity,* the conversation immediately moves to the proper place for worship (a topic of debate between Jews and Samaritans), positioning the woman as Jesus’ theological dialogue partner.

And so, there, in the desert at noon, with all distraction stripped away, all shadows erased, the *light* shines bright enough for these two strangers to discover that they need each other. As they are *transfigured* in the light of the noonday sun, each enemy sees the face of a friend. *Distance* dissolves into *relationship.* *Enmity* melts into *mutuality.* They glimpse a *spiritual wholeness,* a new healing *reality.*

Reid also notes that some of the early church fathers, like *Origen* and *Theo­phylact* of Bulgaria, referred to the Samaritan woman *not* as a converted sinner but as an *apostle,* one anointed with the priesthood, and the *“enlightened one.”*

Ask yourself: If the Samaritan woman is read as a powerful, convincing, and moral figure, how does this change interpretations of the passage? Or as Reid asks at the end of the chapter*, “What does the biblical record about women apostles say to you about ministry in the church today?”*[[5]](#footnote-5)

So, what have we learned about this Jesus and this woman?

Jesus models a *barrier-breaking* relationship of *mutuality* and *compassion.* The woman is *bold* enough to both remind Jesus of what separates them—he a Jew and she a Samaritan—and of what connects them—their ancestor Jacob. She is *audacious* and spars verbally with this strange man. In their truth-telling, she experiences him as *prophet* and in turn she is acclaimed for speaking the word.

To this day, the Samaritan woman is honored in many cultures. In southern Mexico, La Samaritana is remembered on the fourth Friday in Lent, when water flavored with chilacoyota, tamarindo, jamaice and horchata is given to commemorate her gift of water to Jesus. The Orthodox know her as St. Photini, or Svetlana in Russian. Her name means *“equal to the apostles,”* and she is honored as apostle and martyr on the Feast of the Samaritan Woman.

Friends, the gospel witnesses to the gift of God for *all* God’s children. In the vulnerability of an interdependent community, in the insistence upon relationship, in the breaking down of barriers. Jesus shows us a new way to learn about one another, learn the truth of one another, and learn that we need one another. True worship takes place *not* at a sacred mountain or even a shared ancestral well, (place or liturgy) but with life in the spirit, where wholeness is experienced and where truth is known.

As Christians, we are called to follow in Jesus’s footsteps — to be *bridge builders* in a world of disconnection. But just as often, we find ourselves in the position of the woman at the well, a position of vulnerability. *Many of us have been hurt by rejection and the condemnation of others. We know what it is like to be an outcast.* This story is a reassurance that Jesus sees us. There is not a line that he won’t cross to envelop us in his love. He has a place for us in his kingdom, and he longs to bring all his children home. Those who have lost *the most* often truly know the love of our savior. And they know what it’s like to invite *others* who are lost into a place of safety and acceptance.[[6]](#footnote-6)

On another day, also about noon, Jesus will face death and again confess his thirst. On that day, only vinegar will be offered—in mockery. The gift of his *living water* will not be apparent to the one holding that sour sponge.

But today, when Jesus and the Samaritan woman meet, they conspire to bring life out of death. The water they offer each other, water that quenches the thirst of body and soul, holds the gift of life for all.[[7]](#footnote-7)

1. CIARÁN GILES and MARI YAMAGUCHI, *Women’s Day Events Highlight Gaps in Gender Equality,* The Boston Globe, March 8, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Shelby Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious,* Harper Collins, San Francisco, 2007, pp. 258, 259, 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Erin Nolan, *The Woman at the Well,* The Presbyterian Outlook, March 19, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p. 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 4 Julie Morris, *Reading the Bible as a Feminist,* The Christian Century, February 28, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Erin Nolan, *The Woman at the Well,* The Presbyterian Outlook, March 19, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Patricia Farris, *Unlikely Messenger: John 4:5-42,* The Christian Century, February 13, 2002 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)