

March 22, 2020
“Digging Deep and Stretching Wide“
Exodus 17:1-7 & John 4:5-15
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

It's been a hard week, friends. And I know it's been a hard week for you. When people ask how I'm doing, or when I ask how others are doing, it's now the same basic response, "As well as can be expected."

We, all of us, find ourselves in some serious wilderness. The ground beneath us is shifting by the day, feeling less and less solid, more and more rocky.

And as hard as it's been for me, for our family, adjusting our lives to this strange and difficult reality, I know that so many others are quite literally afraid for their lives, for their already fragile livelihoods. Those who were already most vulnerable are even more so in the face of this pandemic, and the ripple effect is virtually endless. The social and economic impact across the board is staggering. This is wilderness on a massive scale.

I suspect we may feel at least something like the Israelites in the story from Exodus. They are – rather unfairly, I think – cast as faithless, grumbling complainers, but how can you blame them for simply wanting water when they're thirsty? Thirsty in more ways than one, with no water in sight, as they stumble through the wilderness, through their fear, through the unknown, helplessly longing for solid ground. For an end to their suffering.

"Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

Our grumbling may not be with God, but in this extraordinarily unsettling, uncertain time in which we find ourselves, on a global scale, we are afraid. And we are thirsty in more ways than one. With little to no water in sight. The shelves are empty. Supplies are out of stock. Our wells are dry.

It is said that you can learn a lot about people by the company they keep. So of all the conversations Jesus had, with his disciples, with his family, with religious and political authorities of the day, it is profoundly telling that the LONGEST conversation he has, at least as recorded in canonized Scripture, is with this Samaritan woman at the well (we only read part of it, to verse 15; the conversation officially continues to verse 26, and the full

story to verse 42). This encounter with the Samaritan woman cuts to the very heart of Jesus' ministry, and to the very essence of the Gospel.

Now we'll get to the CONTENT of their conversation in a minute, but first, a brief bit about the CONTEXT. It's always good practice when digging into the Bible to adjust our 21st century ears to a 1st century reality. In this case, to try to wrap our heads around the fact that this meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is at best unlikely, and at worst, downright scandalous, in the ancient Near East. But why?

For starters, we need to understand the geography. We're told in verse 3 that Jesus left Judea and is headed north back to Galilee. To get there, we're also told that he HAD to go through Samaria. Now if you look at a map, it is certainly the most direct route, but it is certainly not the ONLY one. In fact, scholars tell us that Jews traveling between Judea and Galilee typically went out of their way, crossing east over the Jordan River, to avoid crossing through Samaria.

Which brings us to the second contextual detail. Jesus was a Jew and the woman at the well was a Samaritan. Again, this may not mean much to our modern hearing, but suffice it to say that as a rule, most Jews and Samaritans HATED each other.

The origins of the bad blood are not altogether clear—each side presenting a different story. From the Jewish perspective, Samaritans were a mixed race, descended from foreigners brought into the region after the Assyrians conquered Israel and forced the local population out, nearly 750 years before Jesus came around. A combination of political and religious tension, with occasional episodes of violence, passed down from generation to generation to generation.

We know about conflicts like this, don't we?

Jesus did not HAVE to go through Samaria, and he did not HAVE to speak with this Samaritan woman. But make no mistake, he knew exactly what he was doing. Remember, we learn a lot about people by the company they keep.

A third detail we need to help understand the "scandal" of this meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman: In 1st century Palestine, men and women rarely spoke to each

other in public. In particular, men of the cloth—rabbis or teachers as Jesus was—routinely avoided speaking to a woman in public. In general, women were expected to be seen and not heard. That's why just a little beyond our reading, the disciples return to find Jesus and are "ASTONISHED that he was speaking with a woman."

The disciples were astonished, but Jesus knew exactly what he was doing.

And one final detail with the context. Verse 6 tells us that it was about noon when Jesus sat down to rest by the well. The timing is important here because in that culture, women often gathered at the well, both to collect water and to socialize. But in such an arid climate, they did so in the morning or in the evening when it was cool.

The fact that the Samaritan woman comes to the well at noon, the hottest part of the day, and that she comes ALONE, is an indication that she has been relegated to the margins of society—whether by force or by choice we don't know. Presumably because, as the text goes on to point out, she had had five husbands, and is currently in a relationship with someone not her husband. She is not considered respectable among her peers. She's a sinner, an outsider within her own community. But not to Jesus.

So onto the CONTENT of their interaction, then. When the woman comes to draw water from the well, she herself is shocked to find anyone else there, much less Jesus. And then to have him actually asks her for a drink!

"How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Her response confirms her surprise. But Jesus quickly changes the subject, from a simple drink to quench physical thirst to a much deeper and lasting experience of living water to quench spiritual thirst. We are flesh, and we are spirit.

The woman is understandably confused, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" she asks. "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

"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."

And with those words, with this holy encounter, Jesus digs deep and wide to offer this Samaritan woman, this outsider of outsiders, new life. Living water, the kind that comes from a deeper place. The kind that can gush up even when the well is dry.

Jesus gives her respect. He affirms her humanity. He sees her differently and helps her see herself differently, not as her own community sees her. Not as men see her. Not as Jews see her. But as God sees her. As God created her. As she is.

And perhaps most importantly for our understanding, Jesus crosses all manner of religious, social, cultural and even geographical boundaries to do it. Deep and wide, deep and wide.

That, my friends, is the essence of Jesus' ministry. And it is the essence of the Gospel. The living, loving water that flows from the life-giving spirit of God within each of us. Deep within each of us.

We do indeed learn a lot about ourselves by the company we keep. And so Jesus reminds us here that God's love knows no boundaries. All means ALL!

He proclaims in this encounter with the Samaritan woman, as he will say later, "I have come that they may ALL have life, and have it to the full." Life gushing, life flowing, life abundant, life whole. I have come that their thirst may be quenched and their hunger satisfied—in body and in spirit. That no one need go back, over and over and over and over again, to wells that inevitably dry up. That love and life should not depend on your education level, your zip code, your country of origin, your skin color, your sex, your gender identity, your immigration status, whether you have health insurance, or even decent health insurance, or not. This is living water. This is the very spirit of God which knows no such boundaries or restrictions.

The life of faith is an invitation to dig deeper and deeper within ourselves to access that living water, God's spirit within us. And to stretch wider and wider in loving relationship with the divine and with the divine in each other toward life more full, more abundant, more whole.

And not only that, but as Jesus did with the Samaritan woman, to share that living water, to offer and enable fullness of life for others. To confront, as Jesus did time and time again, the many obstacles and injustices in this life which prevent such abundance for others, especially those relegated to the margins of society for one reason or another. Those on the other side of whatever religious, social, political, economic, geographical, doctrinal, theological, racial, gender, sexual, national boundaries we've created.

Those, today, whose vulnerability in an already profoundly unjust system is further exposed and increased as a result of this pandemic. Lives are at stake. Life is at stake.

This was already our work to do, friends, but for such a time as this, marked by profound uncertainty and vulnerability, brokenness and suffering, may we resolve to go as deep and wide as God's love call us. To go DEEPER within ourselves and WIDER into the world around us to show love. To remove barriers. To cross boundaries. To demand justice. To co-create the world we want, the world we ALL deserve, where we as a people, and we as members of an interconnected planet, may hunger and thirst and want no more.

Deep and wide. Deep and wide.

May it be so.