**“She’s Me”**

John 4:1-42

March 12, 2017, David M. Griebner, Riverside UMC

For the next few weeks are looking at several episodes from the Gospel of John. Today we are in chapter 4 with the story often called the woman at the well. It’s a marvelous story, almost inexhaustible. And I think a large part of the power and delight is just letting it unfold once again before our eyes. So that’s what I’m going to do.

Before we begin we need a little geographical and social context. Jesus and the disciples are on their way from Jerusalem in the south of Israel to Galilee in the north. And Jesus has chosen to go through Samaria. Samaria was the region to the north of Jerusalem and it was the shortest and most direct way to go from Jerusalem to Galilee. However most Jews would not do that. Instead they would avoid Samaria and take a longer route that led around it and added two or three days to the journey. Why? There was longstanding, ancient animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans. First, the Jews considered Samaritans half-breeds because they had inter-married with foreigners. Second, centuries before, when some of the Jews who had been carried away into exile returned to Jerusalem and began to rebuild the walls, the Samaritans opposed that and harassed them. Third, the Samaritans believed that Moses had designated their mountain, Mt. Gerizim, as the place to worship, not Jerusalem. For all these reasons, and certainly more we don’t know about, a Jew would not go this way.

The second thing we need to take into account as the story begins is that in this culture men did not talk to women in public, sometimes including even their own wives.

So Jesus goes some where a Jew would not normally choose to go and He does something a Jewish man would not normally do; He talks to a woman in public.

Now with this little bit of background I think we can move on to the conversation. It begins when Jesus asks the woman for a drink of water. Her response reflects what I’ve just described. She says, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?”

This is the first of several places in this story where I wish I could hear her tone of voice. Given what I just said about Jews and Samaritans hating each other and men not talking to women in public it’s not hard for me to imagine that what she said may have sounded like this: “What rock did you just crawl out from under? Are you so dense that you can’t see that you are not supposed to be talking to me? Crazy Jew.”

Jesus, being Jesus and all, isn’t put off. He doesn’t respond in kind, He doesn’t write her off. Instead He invites her deeper in. “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

Living water is a way of describing water that is free flowing, like from spring or a stream. In the ancient world, and especially in the arid places, it was the very best kind of water. And I’m sure that’s what she pictured in her mind. But we know that Jesus is talking about more than just water. Later in John He will use the same image of living water to mean the Holy Spirit. In other words He’s offering her true intimacy with God.

Of course she has no idea that He means anything more than regular water, and this gives her all the more reason to think this guy is a few cards short of a full deck. Right, she says. So where’s your rope smart guy? I suppose you are greater than Jacob, son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham, who gave us this well in the first place? I hear a real feistiness in her voice. This is a formidable woman.

Again, Jesus is not put off. Instead He doubles down. “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” Even though this is even more outrageous that what He said a moment ago, now she responds with curiosity. What does she have to lose? “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Now comes the most important exchange in the story so far. Jesus says, ‘All right, I’ll do it, *as soon as you go get your husband and come back*.’ This is perhaps the riskiest moment in the whole story. We know she has a secret. Will she tell the truth? Or will she try to hide it? She decides to be honest. She says, “I have no husband.”

What does Jesus do? He actually seems to praise her for her honesty and at the same time He reveals that He knows not just this but even more than she has revealed. She’s had five husbands and the man she is living with at the moment isn’t her husband. Five husbands. Now this is where we can actually lose our way in the story. It’s all too easy to assume the worst about her, but we really don’t know what the true circumstances were. It can’t be adultery or she would probably have been stoned. And it’s unlikely that all of her husbands died. It’s true that if she was a Jewish woman living in Israel or Judea she would have been considered immoral. But I read another commmentator who pointed out that while we have a fair handle on how this might have been treated in Judea, or Jerusalem, we don’t have enough information about Samaritan customs to know how she was treated in her own community.

However, once again, what I do find personally helpful is to imagine how she said it and what she may have felt in her heart when she said “I have no husband,” I hear both sorrow and shame in her voice, but I think mostly sorrow. This isn’t how she thought her life was going to turn out. She had hoped for more. But it wasn’t to be. It’s something I think we can all identify with in some way.

So what will she do, now that she knows He knows. Will she carry on the conversation? Or will she clam up and run away as fast as she can from this guy who seems to know too much? What would you do?

She carries on. She senses that this man is more than He seems. And so she turns to religion. She notes that the Samaritans and the Jews don’t agree on where and how you are supposed to worship God. But the Messiah will sort it all out when He comes. Jesus says, you’re looking at him right now. Oh, to be there at that moment. It gives me chills to think about it.

And so does what happens next. She heads back to town where she tells her story to anyone who will listen. I suspect that many of the people she is testifying to are the same people who, on most days, wouldn’t give her the time of day. But now they listen. And they come. The Jews, Jesus’ own people, couldn’t wait to run Him out of town, but these Samaritans, these half-breeds and this woman, beg Him to stay.

Jesus goes where a Jew would not normally go. He does something a Jewish man would not normally do (talks to a woman in public not his wife or relative). He speaks the truth to a woman who I get the sense most decent people avoided. Against all odds she actually embraces the truth. She shares it with the very same people who probably made her life difficult, and as a result virtually the entire town believes. Not bad for something that began with a simple request for a drink of water.

There are so many ways to go with this story. Here’s where it led me.

She’s me. What do I mean? She has secrets. I have secrets. She has done some things she isn’t proud of. So have I. She has things she really doesn’t want to talk about with Jesus. So do I. So have we all. We all have wounds. We are all broken in some way. So you don’t have five husbands. But we all have something. [Note: When I preaced this message on Sunday and came to this place I offered some suggestions. Looking at it a couple days later, I chose to remove them. I decided that the important thing is for all of us to go to Jesus and let Him ask the question He knows needs to be asked so that we can begin to heal and be set free. So no list. At least not mine. Instead just an invitation to go to the well and let Jesus bring up what only He knows needs to be brought up.]

She’s me in another sense. Like the woman at the well I have to learn again and again that it’s all right to be honest with Jesus, because what He offers is a gift. Remember what Jesus says to her? “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” We can’t earn the remedy that sets us free from the things that hold us back, the things that hold us hostage; it’s a gift. A free gift. It’s grace. And love.

On Friday I attended the funeral service for Mickie Lockwoods’ mother. One of the readings was from 1 Corinthians 13. That’s the so-called “love chapter” and I’ve read it many times. But this time it was read from a different translation. I knew the words in the NIV or the ESV or whatever, but when I heard them this time, in an unfamiliar translation, it just hit me again how magnificent God’s love is for us. Listen.

*Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn’t want what it doesn’t have. Love doesn’t strut, Doesn’t have a swelled head, Doesn’t force itself on others, Isn’t always “me first,” Doesn’t fly off the handle, Doesn’t keep score of the sins of others, Doesn’t revel when others grovel, Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, Puts up with anything, Trusts God always, Always looks for the best, Never looks back, But keeps going to the end. (The Message)*

This is how Jesus loved the woman at the well and it’s how He loves all of us. All the time. So this is also how she’s me.

Finally, she’s me because if I know that if I can accept what He wants to do for me, and in me, He will work through me to reach others. That woman came to the well that day at noon because she probably wasn’t welcome to come with the other women at the normal time, in the cool of the morning or evening. But just a short time later the whole village was listening to her and following her to Jesus.

And so I’m left to wonder what would Jesus do with us, what could He do through us, if we allowed Him to speak truth to us the same way He spoke truth to her? What would Jesus do with the whole Christian Church, with all the people who claim Him Name, if we would all meet Him at the well and ask for the gift He alone can give? What might happen then?

Let’s pray…