

Healing Connections
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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John 4: 1-42

Last week, Nicodemus went to Jesus in the dark because he could not let go of the trapeze bar he had swung on for so many years. After some time with Jesus, his is left with more questions than answers. This week we hear about a Samaritan woman, struggling with some limitations of her own.

It all started when Jesus sat down by a well in the midst of Samaria, at a well that had provided refreshing water since Jacob's time. Jesus was in the middle of a seventy mile hike from Judea to Galilee. Even a Tenderfoot scout would tell Jesus he was breaking two of the most important safety rules: travelling alone, and not having any water.

And I hate to admit this, but I think I've preached this passage incorrectly before. Like other preachers, I've made some false accusations against her. And for that, I am sorry. This unnamed woman has been unjustly characterized by so many of us as a seductress. We've assumed that she had been divorced five times ... that she was intimately involved with the man she was living with when Jesus met her ... but when you read it carefully, the text doesn't really say any of that.

She could have been widowed five times. She might have been barren, which was legal justification for a husband to leave. The Samaritan Woman might have been living with a kind-hearted soul who welcomed her into his home for protection. And have you ever heard a single preacher criticize the five men who may have abandoned this woman in the first place?

And it seems to me that Jesus is more concerned about her loneliness than her sinfulness, anyway. After the encounter, she tells the townspeople, *"He told me everything I had ever done."* Maybe that included her mistakes. Do you think she would run to tell them about Jesus if all he did was list her shame and attack her lifestyle? What if Jesus also talked to her about the good she had done ... the gifts she had shared ... her continuing potential?

The woman is alone at the well in the middle of the day, we don't know why. She seems to go at a time of day when the well is least crowded. Is she avoiding her neighbors? Is she taking a break to get away from a difficult situation by doing a chore in the middle of the day? We don't know.

But we know why Jesus is there. He is traveling directly through Samaria, something a Jew of those days would seldom do. His own people have been unkind to him lately. He comes to the village of Sychar in the middle of the day ... stops at the well feeling bone tired ... weary in body and soul.

He is alone. He sends the disciples into town to get some burgers and fries, but his aloneness is deeper than just being by himself. The Pharisees want his head. His own followers don't understand him. And if they don't understand him, they don't really know him. And if they don't really know him, they cannot possibly love him. And if his closest disciples don't love him ... he is, indeed, alone.

So they meet, these two lonely, weary people, at Jacob's well, in the middle of the day. Jesus reaches out to her ... speaks to her ... asks for a drink of water. Which surprises her, because Jews do not reach out to Samaritans. I've seen that kind of deep animosity in the eyes of Arabs and Israelis, as they call each other foul names and repeat a pattern of hatred that seems almost intractable. They are two people, divided by ethnic identity, unable to respect much less than trust one another. And that is an overwhelmingly deep chasm to cross – but not impossible.

His words offend her customs as well as his ... he has crossed a social boundary she might just prefer to keep. *"How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"* She is bold enough to name what is between them. Righteous men do not speak to unescorted women. She is protecting herself ... setting a boundary ... establishing a safe distance as women to protect themselves throughout the ages.

Jesus tells her that she should be asking him for living water. Like Nicodemus, she takes Jesus too literally, which has been the mistake of so many of his followers. Jesus makes it clear he isn't talking about this well, but eternal life. That's when the woman gets it, she drops her guard ... lowers her shields ... shows her vulnerability. She almost begs Jesus for this living water, and how does he respond?

"Go get your husband." Usually, when people change the subject so dramatically in a conversation, it's a sign that they're uncomfortable ... either with the topic or the circumstances of the conversation. Is Jesus suddenly disconnecting here because they have drifted into an uncomfortable zone?

Or is Jesus' question directly related to the living water somehow? Could it be that the inability of six men to love this woman as she needs has led her to withdraw from relationship and community into isolation? Could it be that relationship is precisely the way we tap the fountain of living water after all?

Then and now, for the most part, men are still defined in our society by what they do. But women – then and now - are often defined by whom they love. That's not true of all men and all women, of course.

This moment at the well is a healing connection for both of them. When the disciples come back they are surprised to find him talking to a Samaritan woman of all people. They put his double cheeseburger and fries down before him ... but he is no longer hungry, no longer weary, no longer alone. She needs living water and he is its source. This time spent with the woman at the well has fulfilled him, encouraged him to continue to reach out across the barrier of religion, ethnicity and gender. It is the healing he needs, too.

The woman goes precisely to the people she has been avoiding and testifies, *"I met this guy. He told me who I am. He can't be the Messiah, can he?"*

One encounter with Jesus has renewed her spirit ... reconnected her with God ... healed her deepest loneliness. She is no longer afraid of community because she has been loved for who she is, as a whole person. And one more thing... she is no longer willing to hide behind her ethnic identity over and against the outsiders. Soon, she will lead the way for all of them to connect with the Messiah.

Relationships can sometimes be damaging, demeaning, destructive. But healing can come to the broken places when we let God love other people through us. All of our relationships ... family, church, friendships, associations, marriage and partnership ... are places where the waters of life can flow ... if we allow ourselves to be open to the free-flowing fountain of God's grace.

Please pray with me... In the hard heat of the day when we think we are alone and forgotten, abandoned and exhausted, you come to us, offering us

a drink of cool refreshment to quench our thirst and renew our spirits. Sometimes you come in the hug of a friend or the encouragement of a co-worker. Sometimes you come in the gratitude of someone we can help. We are not alone. You have set us in a network of healing connections, and all of them have been the product of your free-flowing Spirit. We return now to the streams of mercy never ceasing ... to the waters of our baptism ... and the showers of your grace ... and the still waters which restore our souls ... and we ask you to help us transform every relationship into a place where the waters of eternal life may flow. Amen.