

“WERE YOU THERE? III – THE WOMAN AT THE WELL”

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John 4:5-42

It’s hard to be invisible. Maybe harder still to stand out. And even harder still, while standing out, to be treated as invisible. Such was the plight of the woman at the well in Sychar on that day long ago.

Life had been hard for her. We know so little about her. We don’t know her name, but we do know that she is a citizen of Samaria. We know, too, that she has been married five times and is now living with a man who is not her husband – but we don’t the why of any of that. We don’t know if her five husbands died, or if some of the marriages ended in divorce (which, of course, in that day and age, was totally the prerogative of the man). If he decided he wanted to end his marriage, he simply had to declare publicly three times, “I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you” and it was a done deal. The woman had no say in it.

But like I said, we really don’t know all the details – all that we know is she is a woman who’s had it tough – life has been hard for her. And making it all the harder, was the way society was treating her – well, like she was invisible. They largely ignored her, all the while, of course, making fun of her, gossiping about her, telling their children to steer clear of the likes of her. She might as well have been wearing a scarlet letter for the way she was treated.

Well, this woman appears to have figured out how to deal with all of it. She, in essence, made herself invisible. She did her chores on the off-hours, long after everyone else had done theirs. The city square was busy in the early morning and later in the day, when the sun wasn’t beating down so mercilessly. That’s when the women in the town came to draw water from the well. That’s when the men in the town came to do business. That’s when the children were running around. That, too, is when everyone had a chance to talk with one another and comment on things.

So this woman figured out rather quickly that those times were definitely not when she wanted to be in town. She picked the loneliest, most solitary time – but also the most brutal – in the heat of the noonday sun. But it had proven a wise choice, apparently, for she was able to slip in and slip out, get the water she needed, and no one would see her, or laugh at her, or point fingers in her direction or shoo their kids away. Lonely it was, but it worked for this poor woman.

Until that fateful day. She came on that day, like any other day, to fill her water jug and as she approached the well, she was crestfallen to see someone sitting there. Clearly, it was a problem for her. But what made it more problematic was that the person was a man – as a woman in that day and age, well, you just didn't approach a man on your own. Secondly, he appeared to be a Jew, and a Samaritan certainly didn't talk with a Jew – they were enemies, after all. And what was he doing in Samaria anyway? I would think she was probably pretty irritated as she surveyed the situation.

But she had to do something. She couldn't just walk away without any water, and so she approached the well. And that seemingly little decision would change the course of her entire life.

I would imagine that all she wanted to do at that point was to fill her bucket and be gone. But that was not to be, because as soon as she got there, Jesus spoke, asking her for a drink. She clearly was stunned, and asked him how it was that he, a Jew, would ask her, a Samaritan, for water! I think we underestimate how really shocking that was, in that day and age. One commentator noted that, "It was as though Jesus had lived in the days of black-white segregation as a white man and had asked to drink from the 'colored' water fountain." (On-line, "He Gets Me," David Sapp, 3/27/11)

Well, Jesus, largely ignored that question because he wanted her to know about the living water he could provide. So he began to tell her about it, and she asked questions, and he answered them patiently, and in such a way that she knew she wanted the water he had to offer.

But then Jesus, as one preacher put it so well, "peeled back the layers of her life right before her eyes." (Ibid.) He told her to go and get her husband, and when she said she had no husband, Jesus said, basically, "I know. I know all about you. I know you've had five husbands, and that you're now living with a man who is not your husband." Suddenly, this woman knows this is no ordinary man, and the truth comes out – that Jesus is the Messiah, the One who was promised. It is He! Right there with her, right there telling her that he knows her through and through, and still he offers her living water. While the rest of the world basically threw her away, Jesus offers her life!

And the scripture says, that, leaving her water jug right there at the well, she ran off to tell others about him. A writer named Scott Hoezee put it so beautifully: "She had come to that well more thirsty than she knew earlier that day. She left sensing that she'd never be truly thirsty again." (On-line, The Center for Excellence in Preaching, Lent 3A, Scott Hoezee, 3/13/17)

What an incredible story of a dry and dusty life made whole by the living water of Jesus Christ! This woman who had been beaten down by life was restored and hope-filled. She was so filled with the living water poured forth from Jesus that – well, did you hear what she did? She ran from that place and smack into the arms of all those people who had rejected her – the ones who had pointed at her, mocked her, gossiped about her, kept their kids away from her – those people – she ran right to all of them, and face to face, told them about Jesus and the life-giving water he provides! Her shame was gone, her anger at the people and the way they had treated her didn't seem to matter – all she wanted to do was to help them know what she had come to know – that Jesus, the living water poured forth from God, could change their lives and make them whole as well.

This is an incredible, incredible story – and there are so many messages in it for all of us. In the interest of time, let me mention but a few.

First, and most clearly, all of us are that woman at the well. Oh, we may not carry the baggage she did, or have the kind of back story she did (with her many marriages and other struggles) – but nonetheless, we are like her. We have our own baggage. We have our own stories of struggle and sinfulness and thirst.

Just think about it for a minute. If it was just you and Jesus sitting at that well, if he, as that preacher said, “pulled back the layers of your life,” what would he tell you? Only you know the answer to that, but if we are honest, we know that there are things of which we would not be proud, and maybe even ashamed.

The Good News of the Gospel is that, even knowing that woman through and through, Jesus loved her still and invited her to experience new life. And he does the same for you and me. He knows us through and through – who we really are and who and what we've been and done – and yet, he loves us still and invites us to experience new life, to drink of the living water. It is amazing, is it not? It is, indeed, the amazing grace of which we sang earlier.

That clearly is the most important thing we can take away from this woman's story today. But there is something else, I think. And that is to take a page from Jesus' book on how to treat others that the world has deemed invisible, or scarred, or people who are just plain different from us.

In this story, Jesus crossed so many boundaries that society had set up – he traveled through Samaria, when most Jews of his day would lengthen their trip immeasurably to go around of, rather than set foot in Samaria.

He invited a woman to talk to him, when convention of that day said that a woman by herself should not speak to a man.

He talked to this woman who was an outcast from her own society because of perceptions about her personal life. Jesus didn't join the finger-pointers, instead he sat down and talked to her face to face. Jesus wanted what was best for her, instead of thinking that old pat-line, "She made her bed, let her lie in it."

Friends, we all know that the world can be a bitterly divided place, and still today, we have preconceived notions about people. We see people living in tents and think, "Why don't they get a job?" or "I've heard some people choose to be homeless."

We see people of different colors and nationalities and put labels on them because of that.

We hear about divorces and speculate the reasons why.

We see a young person and think they all think one way, or we see an older person and think they're stuck in their ways.

Perceptions are powerful things, my friends. I can't tell you the number of times over the years that I have heard young people in the church tell me that the older members don't talk to them, while at the same time older people in the church tell me the same thing – that younger people ignore them. You see what I mean?

And these days, oh my, the perceptions that we have of others – unlike it was in the days of that woman at the well, largely secretive – these days, it's out in the open – splashed all over the news and social media. The barriers between us are monumental and the perceptions of others, right out there for all to see.

Oh, these days, we need to learn the ways of Jesus more than ever. Instead of turning and walking the other way, or making assumptions about others, we need to sit down and talk with them – face to face. That woman's life was changed when Jesus spoke with her. I think we would be amazed to find how much life would change if we had the courage to talk to people and hear their stories. I think we would discover how important it is that people know that they matter, that someone cares enough to know their story – and that our hearts might be changed when we do.

My friends, if Jesus loves us that much, if he knows us through and through, knows all of our story and yet loves us still, and tells us in so many ways that we matter, and that our thirst can be quenched by his living water, can we not help others understand that as well, by how we treat them? I hope so. No, I know so.

And if that woman was so touched and so changed by her encounter with Jesus and his gift of living water, that she went right to the very ones who had been so horrible to her, that were so different from her, so that they too could experience

the love of God poured out in Jesus, can we not do the same thing? Can we not reach out to even those with whom we disagree or who are so different from us, because we want them to know the love of God poured out in Jesus? Oh, I hope so.

My dear friends, this wonderful, wonderful Gospel lesson is both a blessing and a challenge for us this day. So may we go forth bathed in the living waters of Jesus, ever aware that he knows us through and through and loves us still. And then may we go forth to treat other people as Jesus treated this woman at the well, out of love for him and love for them.

Amazing, amazing grace – may we believe it, may we receive it, and may we bear it into the world. May it be so!

Amen.