

We go to great lengths to distance ourselves from her. Usually the sermons we hear about her spend a vast amount of time focusing upon the mess she has made of her life. Five husbands and the man with whom she lives now is not her husband? She comes to the well at noon in the heat of the day when everyone else is resting. Obviously the target of her neighbors' scorn, her timing is evidently a ploy to avoid the gossip and pointing fingers. Some preachers go so far as to call her what the rest of us think she is. She is a whore. Her reputation of reckless promiscuity precedes her. She is a sinner big time. And we would do well to avoid her.

Why do we jump to these conclusions? Is it because we are so out of touch with the social customs of the first century that we cannot but paint her so? Is it because we are so bound by our own social customs, our own detailed prescriptions about who should be shunned, who should be left on the outer edges of life that we cannot allow ourselves to look too long or too closely at this one whom Jesus befriends? Are our quick assumptions about her on the same level of our assumptions about Luke's story of the woman who washes Jesus' feet with her tears. "She is a sinner," those looking on sneer (7:39); and we immediately label her a harlot. Could it be that maybe, just maybe she was a gossip? Or a selfish person of some means who refused to share with those in need? Maybe she was "just" judgmental and condemning toward her neighbors. But a harlot, sexually permissive? The only indication we have is Luke's indication that the woman is a sinner, and we jump to the conclusion of what that must mean, reflecting not just first century biases but our own as well.

Step back for a moment and reflect again on how John says Jesus characterizes the woman he meets at Jacob's well. "Five husbands." Does that mean she has been divorced five times or widowed five times or some mixture of the two? First century law, you will remember, denied the right of divorce to a woman. Only a man could file for divorce, and he could do so for any number of reasons. Five times divorced could mean that the woman was promiscuous; but there were other, more lethal, more permanent ways of taking care of a promiscuous woman. So, our leap to so characterize her may be something on the order of premature. Add to this the practice of levirate marriage, obligating a man's brother to marry and produce a child in his bloodline—a marriage in which the widow could well be kept at a resentful distance, unacknowledged by the family or her neighbors as a fully legitimate wife. Given the laws which barred a woman from inheriting property or being granted a financial settlement upon divorce, it may be that the woman had now been thrown upon the mercy (or the avarice) of a man who was not her husband but could provide a roof over her head and food to eat. And just a hint here: Jesus, you will notice, does not issue the woman a special call to repentance but invites her to receive living water.

Does it matter? Does it matter if we view this Samaritan woman as guilty of sin we are quick to label grievous in our own day just as much as it was in the first century? Does it matter if Jesus' provision of living water was to assuage the woman's thirst, the woman's longing in the face of a long life of tragedy rather than careless promiscuity?

Would it surprise you if I said "yes, it does"? It matters because the focal point of the story is the identity of Jesus, not the nature of the woman's sinfulness. The preacher, Fred Craddock muses, thinks he or she does Jesus a favor when she goes to great lengths to separate the woman at the well from the rest of us. "The brighter her nails, the darker her mascara and the shorter her skirt," the greater our witness becomes to the saving power of God in Christ. The woman, however, is clearly "other." She is not one of us. She is dangerous, and we must "beware her seductive ways, her mincing walk, her eyes waiting in ambush" [*Christian Century*, March 7, 1990].

Is this "spring of water gushing up to eternal life" that Jesus offers then, for those "others", people whose dark cloud of sinfulness is so great that we cannot avoid seeing it and identifying it for what it is? Or does this living water that Jesus gives have something to do with us? Is there something so profound in what Jesus has to give that it comes into our lives and fundamentally alters who we are?

We are called to receive God's gift of living water through Christ. Water is familiar imagery in Hebrew scripture. The land of Palestine was so poor in water that water was held up along with bread as the guarantor of life. Wells, pitchers, water pots, and conduits are frequent props in the biblical story, indicating something of the day-to-day struggle for water and its critical importance to life. Flowing streams symbolize "living water," held on a higher level than the captured water of cisterns and critically important for the rites of purification. The figure of desert barrenness often portrays the tragedies, the struggle, the inequities of life; and thirst for God in the midst of that barrenness is a recurrent theme: "As a deer," the psalmist prays, "longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Psalm 42:1-2). God leads God's flock beside still waters and firmly establishes the righteous as strong trees beside streams of water

(Psalm 23:2; 1:3); and the prophets depict God's future when all will be made right in terms of streams in the desert when the people Israel will flourish as God's watered garden (Isaiah 58).

John depicts Jesus, then, drawing upon a rich tradition, a rich heritage of faith when he speaks of himself as "living water", "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." We have here another of John's enacted parables, a story that shows up in no other Gospel. Fleshed out in great detail, it depicts Jesus engaged in the longest dialogue with any one person in all the Gospels. Its length, its detail is important. It is told to make a point.

John tells the story with its circuitous dialogue to draw the reader into the story. We encounter the woman's struggle to understand, her tendency to hear Jesus on one level when we know he is talking on another level. We cheer her openness to the water he has to give—"Sir, give me this water"—only to be frustrated when we realize she is thinking solely on the physical plain—"give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Like her, we are moved by Jesus' inclusive invitation to all who will worship God in spirit and truth. With her we move to share the message, and our hearts resonate with the response of the villagers who move beyond her message. "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Be sure that something significant has transpired here. Be sure that this story says from beginning to end that things are not as they were. The tables have turned. The people who were once an enemy people are now included at the table of God's grace. Be sure that the story extends to include even us. It matters how we see the woman at the well because at bottom it matters whether we are able to see ourselves as one with her and her village. We know that we, too, are among those to whom the good news has come in unexpected places at unexpected times. We, too, find ourselves in the presence of God not because we are somehow privileged above others, but because we have encountered the life giving reality of God's gift of living water through Christ.

We are called to be conduits of God's living water through Christ. A short three chapters later, John places an invitation on Jesus' lips highly reminiscent of his story of the woman at the well: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink (7:37). Jesus goes on: "As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" The woman invited the townspeople, a people who may well have been cruel and dismissive of her in the past, to Jesus; and they came. Living water, you see, has a way of doing that. Rather than being captured in the heart of the believer and held tightly there lest it slip away, it has a way of spilling out to others. If it does not, if we seek to greedily hold it to ourselves so that only our own kind, only those who look like, talk like, believe like, act like us are recipients, it grows tired and stale.

If our relationship to God in Christ is to remain vital and strong, if it is to be a *living* faith, it enlists us, in the words of Linda McKinnish Bridges,

to be the conduit of God's grace for another. Our name or family pedigree does not matter. Our past history is of no particular concern. All that God requires is willing vessels who will leave behind the past and walk boldly into the future, carrying the living water of God's forgiveness and mercy in their lives" [*Interpretation*, April 1994, 176].

Practically, what this means, Fred Craddock suggests, is a particular kind of witness. Like the witness the Samaritan woman bore to her neighbors,

it is invitational (come and see), not judgmental; it is within the range permitted by [one's own] experience; it is honest with its own uncertainty; it is for everyone who will hear. How refreshing. [The Samaritan woman's] witness avoids triumphalism, hawking someone else's conclusions, packaged answers to unasked questions, thinly veiled ultimatums and threats of hell, and assumptions of certainty on theological matters. She does convey, however, her willingness to let her hearers arrive at their own affirmations about Jesus, and they do: "This is indeed the Savior of the world" [*Christian Century*, March 7, 1990]