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The Gospel of John
XII. Never Thirst Forever
John 4:1-30

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Jesus and His disciples are on their way back to Galilee. The Pharisees have begun to take an increasingly hostile interest in Jesus. But the time has not yet come for Jesus to suffer the full weight of their hostility, and so He departs. There were two ways to make this trip back then, and Jesus chooses what amounts to the road less travelled – the straight route right through Samaria, the land of the Samaritans. It is the road less travelled because in those days the Jews and the Samaritans had nothing to do with one another. The Jews looked down upon the Samaritans as being morally, religiously, and ethnically inferior; and the Samaritans returned that derision with a hostility of their own. Suffice it to say that Jews and Samaritans avoided contact whenever possible.¹

Which makes it all the more remarkable that Jesus, a good Jew, would be travelling this route with His disciples. And even more remarkable that, upon entering the Samaritan village of Sychar, He should engage in a conversation with a Samaritan. And not just a Samaritan, but a Samaritan woman. If a good Jew would seek to avoid contact with a Samaritan man, then this was doubly or triply so with regard to a Samaritan woman. A good Jewish man would not converse alone with a Jewish woman – such were the social rules of the day. But for a Jewish man to engage in conversation, alone, with a Samaritan woman was unthinkable, scandalous. And this was not just any Samaritan woman, as we shall see – but a Samaritan woman of questionable character. To speak with this particular Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus is ignoring a triple barrier – Jew and Samaritan, male and female, Rabbi and sinner. And yet it is a conversation Jesus seems eager to initiate.

It begins with a simple request for a drink of water. It is noon, it is hot, the roads are dusty – and Jesus is tired and thirsty. The disciples have gone off to see if they can find some food, so Jesus is alone. Along comes this Samaritan woman. Here is our first clue as to her character: she comes to the well, at noon, alone. She does not come in the cool of the morning, when all the other village women would have come to the well together – indicating that she is not welcome with the other women. She is an outcast in her own village; shunned by the other women. She comes to the well alone, at a time of day when she knows no one else will be there.

And we should also note at this point that this is not just any well – this is Jacob's well. A landmark with great historical and religious significance. Jacob's well was the site of one of Israel's greatest love stories. It was there at that well that Jacob first met and fell in love with his wife Rachel. On another hot and dusty day, Jacob had come to the well and seen, in the distance,

a shepherdess with her flock. He was smitten. Without being asked, he watered the entire flock himself from that well. And then, when Rachel came over to see who it was who had done this, he took her and kissed her – just like that. This was the story of Jacob’s well.²

And this is where Jesus and the Samaritan woman meet. She is startled by His presence, since He is obviously a Jew; and even more startled when He asks her for a drink of water. Reflecting her own appreciation of the barriers between them, she says to Jesus, *“How is that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?”* Jesus’ reply to that question is perhaps anything but what she might have expected. Instead of explaining that He was hot and tired and thirsty and therefore didn’t care who gave Him water, Jesus instead says to her something quite cryptic. He says to her, *“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”* The Samaritan woman scarce knows what to make of this statement – what bizarre claim is this odd Jewish man making? So she interprets His words as plainly as possible – that He is offering to provide her a drink of water from a nearby stream. After all, that is what the phrase “living water” normally meant – it meant running water, as opposed to well water. Even back then, everyone knew that water from a stream was healthier than water from a well.

But there are two problems with this, as she sees it: one, there is no river or stream nearby; and two, He doesn’t have a bucket. And three – okay there are three problems here – who in the world does this man think He is to say something like that? She says to Him, *“Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.”* She must be beginning to wonder if this man is not just thirsty, but also a little touched in the head for Him to say what He has just said to her.

But then Jesus says, *“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”* And again she doesn’t have a clue what He is talking about, or that He is talking about a spiritual rather than a physical reality. This is evident in her reply to Him: *“Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.”* In other words, she doesn’t get it. She has, however, changed her mind about Him – He is not crazy, she thinks; rather He is a man who has found a secret source of water. He is Ponce de Leon and has somewhere found a secret Fountain of Youth. And if she is nice to Him maybe He will share it with her and she won’t have to come to this stupid well at this stupid time of day out of that stupid village where all the women look down on her and won’t even speak to her. Either that, or she still thinks He is crazy and is just trying to humor Him.

But regardless, here is where the conversation gets interesting. For then Jesus says to her, *“Go, call your husband and come here.”* Fair enough, she must think – in that culture men do business with men, not women. But there is another problem here. She answers Him, *“I have no husband.”* Only that is not the whole truth, nor is that the real problem. The whole truth, the real problem, is something which Jesus has seen and known about her as soon as He met her. He says to her, *“You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband.”* Five husbands, and now living with a man who is

not her husband. Maybe she was five times widowed, but that is unlikely. Most likely her husbands have divorced her – for only the husband could initiate a divorce in that culture. Maybe they divorced her because she was unfaithful, maybe because they were. Maybe because she was looking for something better, maybe because they were.

In any case, this fact of five husbands and now a man who is not her husband, combined with the fact that she came to the well alone at mid-day, all adds up to what Jesus has known about her and now holds up before her like a mirror for her life. Namely, that her life is a mess, her capacity for love is disordered, her character is deeply flawed and her future is diminishing. And suddenly, it seems, we have two thirsty people at this well. Jesus wants a drink of water for His physical thirst; but this Samaritan woman is revealed as a having a thirst much harder to quench – a thirst for something that might indeed be called living water.

But it is not so simple, not just yet. Confronted with her sin and her sadness by this stranger, she becomes defensive. She says, *“Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.”* She is being defensive and she is being evasive. Jesus has laid bare her need, her sin, and her sorrow – and she is trying to change the subject as quickly as she can by way of theology. Ask any pastor – we see this maneuver all the time. As soon as someone I am just meeting discovers I am a pastor one of two things happen. Either the fact of being in the presence of a pastor brings forth guilt in the form of some statement like: *“Well, that’s great. You know, my second cousin twice-removed on my mother’s side is a pastor.”* As if to reassure me that even though they personally wouldn’t touch church with a ten foot pole, someone in the family is willing too. As if as long as one member of the family is religious then everyone else can coast in on their spiritual coattails.

Or, the other reaction, which is also based in guilt, is to quickly ask a theological question in order to shift the conversation away from away any possibility of moral and/or spiritual examination: *“So, you’re a pastor. That’s great. I’ll bet you can explain to me about that predestination thing. I’ve always wondered about that.”* That is what this Samaritan woman is doing here. Jesus puts His finger upon her soul, and she immediately and defensively changes the subject: *“So, you’re a prophet. That’s great. Well, maybe you can answer a question for me. Exactly where are we supposed to be worshipping God?”*

But Jesus is not distracted by her question at all. What He is, is patient. He follows her lead, knowing full well the conversation will eventually lead right back to where it needs to. So He speaks to her of a day when the world will no longer be divided up into Jews and Samaritans and other Gentiles, a day when salvation will turn even enemies into brothers and sisters, a day – a glorious day – when God will redeem the earth. And now, finally, Jesus and this Samaritan woman are speaking the same language. For she says to Him, *“I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will tell us all things.”* But I wonder how she voices these words? Does she speak them wistfully, hopefully, defiantly? We cannot know. But we do know what Jesus says in response to her words about the coming of the Messiah, the coming of the One who will indeed tell the truth, save us all, and set everything right. He says to her, *“I who speak to you am he.”*

Just then the disciples come back, bringing the conversation to an immediate close. If only the disciples had been delayed just a moment longer so we could have heard what this woman might have answered to Jesus – so we could have known exactly how she received His claim that He was the Messiah, that He was the One who really did possess living water welling up to eternal life which He would gladly give to all who acknowledge their thirst. But even though she didn't get a chance to say it, we can clearly see what it was she would have spoken through what she then goes and does. Completely forgetting her water jar, and thus the whole reason why she had come to the well in the first place, she races back to her village – this same village where she is an outcast. And she begins telling everyone of her encounter, saying to everyone with excitement and wonder, *“Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?”* *“Come and see,”* she tells them – and that is our chief clue as to what has happened, is happening, in her heart. For we have heard that phrase before – twice already in John's gospel. *“Come and see”* – it is the very invitation that, earlier in John's Gospel, marked the calling of a small group to become the first disciples of Jesus Christ. *“Come and see”* signifies the beginning of a saving faith.

She is no longer the woman that she was. She has been brought back to life. She is not thirsty anymore – that thirst that neither six paramours nor Jacob's well could quench has now, at long last, been satisfied: *“The water that I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”* And her new life is so obvious, her new spirit so compelling, her excitement so genuine, that the other villagers cannot help but go and see this One she is talking about. And by her witness, a great revival begins to break out in this village. The villagers bring Jesus back with them. He stays with them and they drink in His every word.

And, by the end of Jesus' time there, the other villagers say to this woman in their own excitement, *“It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.”* All of this reveals to us how this Samaritan woman received Jesus' declaration to her that He was the Messiah, the giver of living water – she believed Him. She drank in His pronouncement and found her thirst sated, found a spring of water welling up in her that felt just like new life, just like eternal life. She believed Him, she believed in Him – and so became alive again.

So what are we to make of this story, some two thousand years later? Some take it as a story illustrating how Jesus came to break down the barriers we erect to divide one group from another – barriers of race, gender, nation, and culture. How in Jesus Christ all peoples are now being made one. The story certainly supports this interpretation, but this is not the central meaning of this story.

Some others read this story as a born again story – a companion story to the story of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus in chapter three. Certainly the comparison is striking. Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the middle of the night, this woman in the middle of the day. Nicodemus is a religious leader; this woman is a public sinner. Both are offered new life. Nicodemus walks away confused. This woman runs back to her village redeemed. And so, in this story, we are meant to see something of what born again really means. For those who open up to Jesus their thirst for redemption, life really can begin anew, born from above. Surely this is the central meaning of this story, of this encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. She

is born again – living water welling up into eternal life within her, just the way Jesus had promised it would happen.

But even so, there is still one more way for us to characterize this story. A way which takes us back to where we started – at Jacob’s well, the place where Jacob met Rachel, the scene of one of the Bible’s greatest love stories. I think we are also meant to receive this meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well as another love story.³ But the story of an even greater love than that between Jacob and Rachel. This time the love story is between God and His wayward children. What transpires there at Jacob’s well between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is nothing less than a living enactment of the love proclaimed to us in John 3:16 – an enactment of how God so loved this lost and wayward world that He sent to us His only begotten Son, not so that we should be condemned, but so that we should be saved. She was lost, but now is found. She was dead in her sins and sadness, but now is alive again and anew and forevermore.

It is a love story – the greatest of all love stories. It is the story of how the redeeming love of God one day found and brought back to life a Samaritan woman. It is a story that speaks to us of how that same redeeming love is even now searching for you and me.

“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters . . .” God says to us through His prophet Isaiah.⁴ For *“Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring welling up to eternal life,”* God says to us through His Incarnate Son.

“Sir, give me this water.”

¹ See, for example, II Kings 17:24ff.

² Genesis 29:1-12.

³ Richard Lischer, “Strangers in the Night,” *Christian Century*, Vol. 116, No. 6 (February 24, 1999), p. 213.

⁴ Isaiah 55:1.