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John 4:1-42

“Messiah gladly gives purifying water to impure woman”

Jesus answered 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" (4:10).

Last week we looked at Nicodemus, this week we look at the Samaritan woman who is the mirror opposite to Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a man, a Jew, and a respected member of society who came to Jesus by night. The Samaritan woman was obviously a woman, a Samaritan, and a marginal member of society who encountered Jesus in broad daylight.

If I were to write a newspaper article based on this chapter, the headline might be: “Messiah gladly gives purifying water to impure woman.” And the subhead would probably read: “Woman tells city, ‘He knew everything I had done.’”

John 4 begins like many love stories in the Old Testament. A man traveling in a foreign land meets a young woman beside a well. She gives him water and hurries home to tell her family about the visitor. The man is invited to stay, and a betrothal is arranged. This is how it worked with Jacob and Rachel. It is no accident that Jesus was at “Jacob’s Well” when he met the Samaritan Woman. However, Jesus is not looking for a wife but is interested in her heart.

A few wrinkles appear in the passage. First, unlike the maidens in the Old Testament, the Samaritan woman has been married 5 times and is living with a sixth man (4:16-18). The text does not say whether she was divorced or widowed, but by almost any estimate a series of five husbands seems excessive. As one commentator stated, “At best her story is tragic; at worst it is sinful” (Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 49).

What you might not know is that her personal history parallels her national history. The Samaritans were not simply descendant of Jacob; their ancestry was mixed. The Assyrians who conquered the region in 721 B.C. brought colonists from five foreign nations into Samaria (see 2 Kings 17:24). During the time of Herod the Great, the colonization continued as Herod settled thousands of foreigners in the Samaritan capital. The Samaritans lived alongside the foreigners but did not intermarry with them as extensively as before. Thus, when Jesus said, “You have had five husbands and the one you are living with is not your husband”, he not only was referring to the Samaritan woman but also the people of Samaria.

How do you think the Israelites viewed the Samaritans? Not good. The Israelites thought of the Samaritans as unclean dogs. In fact, a Jewish Council in A.D. 70, adopted a ruling that said Samaritan women were in a constant state of impurity from their birth” (Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 168).

Even more, how do you think the Israelites would have viewed this woman? There is a reason she is alone at the hottest part of the day. She is an outcast among outcasts. If Nicodemus was one of the highest members of society, she was definitely one of the lowest. It would have been easy for Jesus to pass her by. But he didn't. Instead, Jesus asked her for a drink. *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance"* (Luke 5:31-32).

This leads to the second wrinkle in this passage. When Jesus asked her for water, the woman did not understand the request. That is why Jesus says, "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" (4:10). How do you take these words? What tone do you hear? Is Jesus scolding her? Is Jesus condemning her? No. Jesus wants her heart. Jesus is saying, "Ask me and I will give you living water."

The interplay between the two of them is great. With each interaction, the woman is coming closer and closer to faith. At first she says in verse 9, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" Then in verse 12 she says, "Are you greater than our father Jacob?" In verse 19, she says, "Sir, I can see that you are a prophet." And then in verse 25, she says, "I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming. When he comes he will explain everything." To which Jesus replies, "I who speak to you am he (literally I AM)" (4:26). In other words, at first she saw him as a Jew but eventually she came to understand him as the Messiah.

It is no accident that when the woman left the well, she left without her water jug (4:28). She had tasted the living water.

*"On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. **38**Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." **39**By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive" (John 7:37-39).*

What does this mean for us? To the woman, Jesus said, "Ask and I will give you living water." To the crowd at the feast, Jesus said, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink." The point is that Jesus wants you to drink. Jesus wants you to have living water.

But it is at that very point where we object? We doubt ourselves. We say things such as, "But I am too dirty?" "I am a no one in society?" "I have messed up too many relationships." To which, Jesus says, "I know everything you have done. Ask and I will give you living water."

For others they do not doubt themselves as much as they doubt this promise. "How can water do this? How can bringing an infant to the waters of baptism accomplish anything?" Jesus replies, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Ask and I will give you living water."

"But I am too dirty?" Jesus replies, "The water will purify you. Ask and I will give you living water."

"But I do not know enough?" Jesus states, "The Spirit will teach you. Ask and I will give you living water."

“How can I be sure?” we object. Jesus points to his side and says look at the scar on my side. Do you remember what flowed from Jesus’ side? Blood and water. The blood is a sign of Jesus’ death. The water is the sign of our life in Jesus. I John 5:6-8 explains, “This is he who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood: and these three agree.” Do not doubt Jesus’ offer. Instead hear his promise: “Ask and I will give you living water.”

Great Commission Subhead

There is one final word I want to speak. It is a Great Commission word. I told you at the beginning of the sermon that the subhead would probably read, “Woman tells city, “He knew everything I had done.”” There could be another subhead: “Disciples went to town and brought Jesus lunch; the woman went to town and brought Jesus the town!” You see, after the woman had tasted the living water, she went as a laborer back to the city. She told the city about Jesus. She told them that Jesus knew all that she had done. And then she brought them back to Jesus. And in meeting Jesus, and tasting of the living water, they were able to say, “Truly this man is the Savior of the world” (4:42).

Reformation, Jesus has promised that the fields are ripe for the harvest. Let us go and share the gospel so that the subhead would read: “Reformation goes into the city of Westminster and the city drinks living water.”

**In Jesus’ Name,
Amen**