

Living Water  
John 4:3-26

The events of today's passage had to have been unusual for Jesus. After all, during most of His ministry, He was traveling around the country, preaching to huge crowds. Oh, he performed quite a few miracles for individual people along the way, and He certainly reserved many of His lessons for the small group of men who were His closest disciples. But because so many people were constantly crowding around Him for healing, He rarely seems to have had the opportunity for extended one-on-one conversations.

And although His attitudes toward women were quite progressive in comparison to most Jewish men of that time, Jesus certainly didn't spend much time with Samaritans. As verse 9 points out, Jewish people had little to do with these folk, even though they lived in the area between Galilee, where Jesus grew up, and Jerusalem, the center of Jewish worship.

Why is that? Well, the Samaritans were a mixed race of people: partly of Jewish ancestry, but also tracing their lineage back to other nations whom the Assyrians settled in the area after carrying the Jews off into exile some 700 years earlier.

And as might be expected, the Samaritans' religious beliefs diverged considerably from those held by the Jews. The Samaritans believed that the proper place to worship God was on nearby Mt. Gerizim, rather than at the Temple in faraway Jerusalem. The Samaritans' ritual purity laws were also much less strict, so most pious Jews considered them to be unclean. But most importantly, the Samaritans thought that only the first five books of the Bible, the Books of Moses, were truly authoritative.

And so we see that, in many ways, Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman was even more of a stretch than Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch that we read about last week. But while the eunuch was much wealthier and more socially prominent than was Philip, Jews like Jesus normally assumed a superior position, looking down on Samaritans as nothing more than a rabble of impure heretics. And if Philip the family man had little in common with a eunuch who could not have children, how much greater was the gap between Jesus, who had never even had a sexually impure thought, and this Samaritan woman, who, shall we say, seems to have been on the Elizabeth Taylor plan where it comes to the number of husbands she had?

But that's what makes this conversation so interesting. For even though Jesus had so little in common with this woman, and even though He had so many reasons to look down on her, He instead adopted an attitude of the greatest humility. He made no attempt to hide his thirst and exhaustion, and since He obviously had no vessel with which to reach the water in the well, he asked her for a drink – even though most Jews would have considered any Samaritan's jar or cup or dipper to be unclean.

And this has a lot to tell us about our own gospel conversations, doesn't it? Yes, we evangelicals pride ourselves on our proper respect for the Scriptures. Yes, we rightly lament the sexual revolution and the damage it has done to countless women and children over the last fifty years. But if the perfectly spotless Son of God could humble himself before such an obvious heretic, someone who had made such a hash out of her marriage vows, what room do all of us sinners have to look down on other sinners, others who are no more and no less worthy of the death penalty than we are? Surely, we should be just as eager to reach across any barrier of race or party, of class or creed in order to spread the gospel.

And notice this too: in spite of His obvious and important differences with this woman, Jesus refuses to pick a fight with her. In fact it's the other way around: the Samaritan woman is the one who brings up their racial differences, perhaps at first because of her understandable distrust of a Jewish man she had never met. And as they continue to talk, she is the one who reminds Jesus that they worship in different places, probably in order to shift the topic of conversation away from her own sin.

But here's what's so interesting: in spite of her repeated attempts to build barriers between them, Jesus refuses to be deterred. Instead, He stays on message. He is patient and determined, pursuing the conversation even when she tries to brush him off. After all, as he tells this woman in verse 22, all those ethnic differences and worship practices that we think are so important just don't matter in the long run.

And so we would do well to model Jesus' evangelistic priorities: instead of being deterred by socio-economic differences and instead of getting sidetracked into nonessential disputes, we need to keep the gospel firmly in mind. We need to keep the main thing the main thing.

But there's one more thing that Jesus' example should help us learn: how to deal with the question of sin when talking about the gospel. Now, Jesus doesn't start His conversation with this subject – even though it was clear that she was some sort of outcast because she came to the well by herself. Instead, He first points to her obvious physical thirst and uses it as an example of her much greater spiritual thirst. In other words, he doesn't try to use guilt to drag her into the Kingdom. Instead, he starts with her obvious brokenness and points her to the gospel as its only true solution.

But at the same time, Jesus doesn't just sweep her sin under the rug. In fact, He's the One Who, by asking her to call her husband, brings her sin out into the open. Just so, Jesus doesn't shy away from taking a side on the theological issue that divides them, saying plainly and clearly that "salvation is from the Jews" (verse 22).

In the same way, while it is best to start by acknowledging the brokenness that sin always produces in all of our lives, we need to be honest about the one root cause of that brokenness: our individual and cultural refusal to follow God's design for our lives and our relationships. We need to confront the universal problem of human rebellion against God, our wandering away from the only true source of life and light and truth. Or to use Jesus' own illustration, we need to admit that the reason we are all thirsty is because we have turned away from the only source of living water.

Okay, so we've stepped across the racial or cultural or political or religious barriers that separate us from so many people, forming real relationships with those who need to know Christ or to know Him better. We've steadfastly pursued those relationships, refusing to allow ourselves to be sidetracked by arguments that have no eternal significance. And we've been honest about the real problem that all of us face: the sin that separates us from God and from one another, the sin that is the true source of all our brokenness. Now what?

Well, look again at Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman. He keeps drawing the conversation back to Himself, doesn't He? Instead of allowing her to remain preoccupied with the physical water from Jacob's well, He insists that He is the only true source of living water. Instead of letting the conversation get bogged down in questions of the proper place to worship, He insists that He is the only One Who can bring anyone eternal life, filling us with His Spirit and thus allowing us to worship God in Spirit and in truth. And instead of debating which books of the Bible are authoritative, Jesus says that He is the One Who fulfills all the promises of all of the Scriptures. For as He told her, He is the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed prophet, priest and king that God promised His people so many years earlier.

And that's the same message we need to proclaim today. For whatever questions people may have about morality or ethics, about right or wrong, about life or death, the answer is found only in Jesus. Moreover, we can explain this even more fully than Jesus could in this passage, because we can talk about the events in His life that hadn't happened at the time He had this conversation, the great truths to which the communion table points: that Jesus' blood was shed as a perfect sacrifice for all our sin, all our rebellion against God; that Jesus rose from the dead to give us not only eternal life with God forever, but new life, abundant life now, life that flows from being joined to Him as closely as we are with the bread we eat; that Jesus ascended into heaven, where He rules and reigns forever; and that He will return again to set all things right and to make all things new, to banish all the brokenness we experience in our fallen world today by destroying sin forever.

In short, we know that it is because of the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ that He is able to keep the promises He made to this Samaritan woman: promises to give us the living water of the Holy Spirit which leads to eternal life; promises to form one holy, universal and apostolic church from both Jews and Samaritans, indeed from all the peoples from all the world through all the ages, who will together worship God in Spirit and in truth. And Jesus makes these promises to all who truly trust in Him as Savior and Lord, to all who rely on His perfect sacrifice for sin and who submit every aspect of our lives to His holy and divine authority.

So, come to the table, trusting in His promises. But don't stay here. Instead, do what this Samaritan woman did. Go tell others about the Messiah you have met here. Share the good news of the One Who heals our brokenness with His body that is given for us, even as we all urge everyone to trust in the One Who washes us clean of our sin by His blood, filling us with the living water that leads to eternal life.