

March 26 27, 2011
3rd Sunday in Lent
John 4:5 – 42
Be a bucket

What a switch from last week! Remember Nicodemus? The curious Pharisee who talked with Jesus, under cover of darkness, but was having trouble understanding what Jesus was trying to tell him. He was trying to understand with his head. Jesus wanted him to understand with his heart. Today's reading comes from the next chapter in John's gospel. It's about Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, at high noon. She understood what Jesus was saying, both with her head and with her heart. She didn't just get it – she raced back to her village to tell everyone she knew, to tell them about the living water she had found at the well. Such a contrast to last week, when Nicodemus slipped back into the darkness of unbelief. Last week's scene wouldn't have been out of the ordinary for a Jerusalem Jew. Jesus was talking theology with another man, a faithful, educated, leader of the community. The scene in today's reading would have been very out of the ordinary for a Jerusalem Jew. It would make a Jewish Emily Post blush. It was most improper. Jesus talking to a woman, a Samaritan woman, a woman who had had five husbands, in the middle of the day, drinking from her cup and bucket. Even though Jerusalem Jews were the strictest about not associating with Samaritan Jews, even a Galilean Jew wouldn't have spoken with a Samaritan woman. Jesus clearly didn't care about what other Jews would think of his actions.

The major contrast between these two stories is between a Jerusalem Jew, a man in leadership, who couldn't believe, and a Samaritan woman, an outsider, who immediately believed.

Scholars disagree about what her marital history means. Did Jesus knowing her unique story function only to identify him as a prophet? Were her 5 husbands symbolic of the misconception Jews had that Samaritans worshipped 5 gods? One of the scholars I read urged us to lose the layers of interpretation that have been heaped upon her – assuming she's a prostitute, or some sort of Elizabeth Taylor wannabe. In any case, Jesus knew what her story was, and it didn't shock him. It didn't keep him from offering her God's love, God's living water.

What an amazing thing John has done by making water symbolic of God's love. That elemental part of creation that makes up the majority of our bodies and the earth itself. What lovely good news today's reading is for all of us! Whatever our stories, Jesus meets us at the well, eager to

quench our thirst with living water. The very waters in which we were baptized. So, for whatever thirst is in your life at the moment, however you need God's love, may today's gospel reading meet that thirst. May we be as quick as this Samaritan woman was to accept what Jesus is eager to offer us.

The moment in the story that grabs my attention is when she puts her bucket down and runs back to town to tell others about Jesus. She became the vessel, the bucket, that carried the word of God back to her village. Both the way Jesus interacted with her, and her own passion, both have so much to teach us about being God's people, about being followers of Jesus. Let's make sure we don't miss any of those lessons for sharing the life force of Jesus' living water.

Lesson one in being a bucket who carries Jesus' living water . Meet people where they are. In this story Jesus teaches us not to try to squeeze people through our cookie cutter. God accepts them where they are. Jesus did. We need to, too. Jesus' living water is there for them whether or not they take their tongue piercing out, or shower, or move to a better neighborhood, or get sober. That's hard to do – meeting people where they are. We are just sure they'd be so much happier if they were more like us. Sometimes the people we encounter who need living water, their lives are so different from ours that they frighten us. On the other hand, it may be hard to meet someone where they are if we think they're lots better than us. We may be too intimidated by someone to think that someone who is successful, wealthy, well-educated needs Jesus' living water. Many of us know that icky feeling when someone can't meet us where we are, when they're shocked by what we tell them, or by what they see in us. If we're going through a tough time – a serious illness, lost a job, ending a marriage, kids having problems – we may have had the awkward experience of running into a friend who hasn't called, because they can't meet us where we are. It's too hard. They don't know what to say. They can't look you in the eye and ask how you are. They avoid talking about the obvious, even when you know they know what you are going through. Even though the need may be great, there's no way living water can be shared if we can't honestly meet people where they are. As individuals and as a church family, if we want to be a source of Jesus' living water, we need to be able to meet people where they are by stretching our compassion, by being honest with our own struggles so we can empathize with others, instead of running from them, because we can't face our own fears.

Lesson two for being a bucket. Jesus showed us in today's story how profound it is to be able to receive something from another person. We'd be pretty arrogant to think that we're the only

ones with this living water. After all, every person is created in God's image, so we can learn something new about God from them. And no one wants to join a group of people if you don't feel like you genuinely have something to offer. It feels good to be needed, to be able to share your skills, your caring. Do you have a friend who was so willing to do for you, but who won't let you do for them? After a while, that limits a friendship. It can be hard for some of us to open our lives and our hearts to receive something from someone. Especially if we think they are far beneath us or far above us in some way. But in this story, that's exactly what Jesus asks us to do. To drink from one another's cups.

Lesson three. To reach out to others genuinely, we need to forget about our own needs for a time. Even though Jesus was thirsty himself, he wasn't so preoccupied with himself that he couldn't see this woman's needs and respond to them. We can't reach out to others if we're completely self-centered.

Lesson four for being a good bucket. Jesus teaches us to live outside the box. To ignore the artificial boundaries that society builds. To take risks. To practice our faith outside this box. To talk to people when we "shouldn't." To see them as a child of God before all else. Carrying buckets often requires breaking boundaries.

Lesson five. Jesus teaches us the simple importance of listening. That goes along with putting your own needs aside. To be fully present to the other person. Sharing God's love is often simply about compassionate listening.

Today's story teaches us that church doesn't just happen here. We are the church when we gather, but it's just as important that we're still the church, the body of Christ, whenever and wherever we're scattered. There are lots of wells out there in the world where we can meet people and share with them the living water that we've found. And there are plenty of days in all our lives, when **we** need someone to meet **us** at the well because for one reason or another we've become spiritually thirsty. We need to be reminded that God loves us just as we are. That we are not alone. If you have been giving living water at the well, I hope you'll be as transformed, as excited as the Samaritan woman. If you're not, you probably need to make another trip. That's another lesson in evangelism. If a church doesn't see evangelism as a priority, or thinks that it's the pastor's job, that's a sure sign that they're running way low on living water and need to meet the risen Christ at the well. We are each and all together called to be

vessels of God's living water, running with excitement through life, showing or telling everyone we meet about the God who loves us and the Christ who leads us.