

Third Sunday in Lent: March 15, 2020

Chapel of the Resurrection, Gloria Christi Chapel, Valparaiso University

BAPTISM: Amelia Elizabeth LaMarre

Prayer of the Day

Merciful God, the fountain of living water, you quench our thirst and wash away our sin. Give us this water always. Bring us to drink from the well that flows with the beauty of your truth through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

John 4:5-42

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. ⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered 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." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵ The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." ²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." ²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" ²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" ³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him. ³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." ³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that

you do not know about." ³³ So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" ³⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵ Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." ³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² They said to the woman, "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."

Sunday worship at the Chapel has been suspended indefinitely. This sermon would have been preached by Pastor Mark W. Bartusch, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Theology, were it not for the Covid-19 pandemic.

Although the Sunday morning celebration of the Eucharist was cancelled, Amelia Elizabeth was baptized surrounded by family, and the whole company of saints on earth and in heaven, at 10:00am in the Baptistry. Portions of this message were shared then, there.

Things are not always as they seem. People are not always who we think they are. Take today's Samaritan woman at the well. Who is she? Too many commentators and too many preachers – mostly men – imagine that this Samaritan woman is, for some reason that is no more than the product of their wild imaginations or untamed fantasies – it's certainly not in the Bible! – they imagine she is inclined to wearing nail polish that is too bright, skirts that are too short and tops that are too tight, and makeup that is just, well, too much; that this Samaritan woman is in some way radically sexually immoral; a promiscuous woman who bounces from one man to the next; that she is a “fallen woman” or prostitute or, in plain language, a slut.

Where in the world do we get those ideas?! Not from Jesus. Not from the Bible. Nowhere does Jesus call her a sinner (sexual or otherwise), or tell her – as he tells another woman, an adulteress caught in the act – to “go and sin no more.” Truth be told, there are any number of reasons why this Samaritan woman might have the *past* she has had – five husbands; and the *present* she has now – “the one she has now is not her husband.” Perhaps she was married off as a teen bride, then widowed and passed along among her dead husband's brothers, as per the “Levirate marriage” practice of the day – think Judah and his more righteous daughter-in-law, Tamar. Maybe her various husbands have

abandoned her because she's barren. Maybe she's a victim of abuse. Whatever the case may be, in Jesus' day women did not have the legal power to end their own marriages — the authority to file for divorce rested with men alone. People are not always who we think they are. It is good for us to be more honest about what we know and what we do not know about people!

There are lots of similarities between today's woman at the well and Nicodemus, whom we encountered last week. They are, of course, similarities in difference. Nicodemus comes to Jesus as a someone in authority; he is a man and a Pharisee, a Jewish leader; one who represents a community's best judgment. He is an insider — a Jew, like Jesus; and a person accustomed to being included in the loop. And we know his name.

Then there is the woman of Samaria, an outsider, to whom Jesus comes. She appears in our story and on the scene unexpectedly, as if from nowhere, like that other mysterious character, the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” without even a name. Indeed, the most we can about who she is all obscured by signs of her exclusion: she is an outsider; she is a woman; she is a Samaritan with whom Jews have nothing to do in a Jewish text; she lives her daily life in the shadows of her own marginality. Yet while Nicodemus must tiptoe through the streets of Jerusalem, and comes to Jesus stealthily, in the night, under the cover of darkness; this woman meets Jesus in broad daylight, under the hot midday sun.

If things are not always as they seem, then what do we have in this story? Let's begin with what the story actually *is*. As theologian Barbara Brown Taylor observes,

Jesus' dialogue with the woman at the well is his longest recorded conversation in the New Testament. Jesus talks to the Samaritan woman longer than he talks to his twelve disciples, or to his accusers, or even to his own family members. What is more, she is the first person – and a cultural *and* religious outsider, at that; a foreigner, an alien – she is the first person to whom Jesus reveals himself (“I AM he” – that’s God’s proper name!) in John’s Gospel. *And* — and this might be the most compelling feature of all – she is the first believer in any of the Gospels who at once becomes an evangelist, and she brings her entire city to Jesus. She says to her townspeople: “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” “They left the city and were on their way to him.... Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony.”

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let’s go back to the well.

John tells us it is noon, when the sun is highest in the sky; it is the hottest time of the day. Most of the women of the village, who needed water for cooking and cleaning and other household chores, would have come early in the day to that well, long before it got so hot, and when all the other women of the village had assembled there to share the latest news across the village gossip network.

But this woman comes to the well after everyone else has already left. She heads to the well in the scorching heat of the day, instead of in the cool of the morning. She hopes to come and go, as if she were invisible; she *expects* to come and go, once more – as she has so many other times – undetected, bearing on her own and by herself, whatever suffering, wound, sin, worry, or hopelessness her life has left her with. This Samaritan

woman comes to the well where Jesus is already resting and waiting; she comes with bucket in hand and shoulders bent over.

Jesus is at the well first. He is waiting for her. And in this moment he transgresses all sorts of social protocols; Jesus crosses all kinds of boundaries – simply in asking her for a drink of water. In such a public place, men and women just did not associate with each other, or engage one another in conversation. More than that, as the storyteller reminds us, Jews and Samaritans aren't supposed to get along – they don't share anything in common: neither food, nor drink, nor tableware. But here at this well, Jesus and the Samaritan woman admit their common needs, and affirm their mutual humanity. Across those boundaries, across all that would divide, Jesus sees her. He sees the whole of her. The past. The present. The future. He sees who she has been, what pain she has endured. He knows what she yearns for now; he knows her loneliness, how she must hurt. And he knows all that she might become. Jesus acknowledges her presence; he engages with her and treats her with dignity. Jesus accepts her, and blesses her, and honors her. He gives her there, at Jacob's well, nothing short of "living water," so that she is made new! Her life is changed! In her being entirely known by Jesus, she comes to know him as Messiah.

After her encounter with Jesus, the Samaritan woman leaves her water jar there at that well, and returns home. No, it's better than that! She bounds homeward, skipping, dancing, uplifted in body and spirit, by the water Jesus gives that has become in her a spring of water gushing up, overflowing. And it's not exactly to her home that she goes skipping and leaping, where she has locked herself away for so long from the gaze and

company of the other women of town. No, this day, she leaves that well and goes to the town center, where everyone has gathered in the shade, and she announces to them – she proclaims to them – all that has happened to her in her encounter with Jesus. She becomes a preacher, sharing good news!

Her life is changed because, perhaps for the first time in her life, she feels as though she has been seen – really seen; and for first time she senses that she has been fully known by someone. The truth of her life has been laid bare. The rejection, loss, grief, abandonment, fear, vulnerability, and self-doubt – all that had been weighing her down. It is as if a great weight were released from her shoulders; as if whatever had been weighing her down — whatever it was that she kept on bearing with her along with her bucket to that well, alone, at the hottest time of the day, when no one else was there – all that was taken away by Jesus.

We bring to the waters of Holy Baptism a wide variety of buckets of our own, in which we carry the burdens of our lives and world: our fragility and our fears; our sin and our shame, our temptations and our grief; and failings and our losses. What is it that burdens you this day, that weighs you down? I have a few ideas. Where to begin? I bear them, too. We bring all this with us to the well, to the font where Jesus is, and where he is already waiting for you. Jesus meets you at this font, and today is a time for remembering that. Here, Jesus crosses for us between life and death and new life. Here, in the words of last week's story, we are born again, born anew, born from above, by water and the Spirit. We come up out of these waters changed people; our lives overflowing with living

water for the life of the world, gushing up to eternal life – that we might go and proclaim good news to all we meet.

And this day, once more, Jesus comes and waits here at this place – at this well. And today, Jesus meets another woman, right here, at these “living waters.” She, too, is a “beloved disciple,” and we even know her name! *Amelia Elizabeth, child of God*. Amelia: you, also, are wholly known by Jesus; he knows your past – all that you share with all of humanity – our fragility and vulnerability; he knows your present – your needs, your wants, your helplessness, your fears, your hunger, your loneliness; he knows your future – and the promise that in your baptismal life, by your words and deeds, you will let your light shine before others, and you will bear witness to the generous goodness and compassion of God; and to the forgiveness and confidence that is yours even as you are held securely, forever, in Jesus’ love.

Jesus leaves that well in our story without ever having been given something to drink. That will have to wait for another day, for another occasion that St. John tells us also transpires at midday, when the sun/son is highest above the earth. It’s a story at the end of the gospel; not at a well but at the place of the skull. There on the cross, suspended between life and death, in the moments before he declares victoriously “It is finished! – Jesus will once more ask for a drink of water: “I am thirsty.” This time, this last time, Jesus is given something to drink, not water but sour wine.

Yet even in that moment, in his dying, he gives. It is also there on the cross that Jesus pours out, from his body broken in death and from his pierced side, living waters

that cleanse us unto eternal life and the blood of the lamb by which we are forgiven and restored to life.

From this well, where we are joined to Christ's saving death, we move to the table, where Christ is – as he seems always to be! – already waiting for us; where he is himself both host and meal. In a few moments we will gather once more at the table which is for us a foretaste of the great feast to come; where with that Samaritan woman, and Amelia Elizabeth, and all the saints of every time and every place, we will altogether raise a toast and celebrate with our risen, ascended, and victorious Lord. In the name of Jesus. Amen.