

What you just heard is the longest conversation that anyone has with Jesus in all of scripture, and I also believe one of the most misunderstood. How many of you have heard sermons on this passage that refer to this woman as promiscuous? Yeah, I'm pleased to tell you that's not what this story is about. Nor is this a story of an unlucky widow whose been mistreated by first century patriarchy. No, it's much better than that. This is a healing story, one in which those parts of our families and those parts of our own lives that have been exiled and shamed are welcomed back into the embrace of love. That's what this story is about, and we all need it.

It all starts because Jesus goes to Samaria. Having been in Judea, Jesus takes the journey back home to Galilee, and verse four says, **"he had to go through Samaria."** For those of you not up on your first century Middle Eastern geopolitics, I can assure you Jesus did not have to go through Samaria to get to Galilee. It is the most direct route, but it is neither the safest nor expected route. Most Jews in this situation would either head up the Mediterranean coast north to Galilee or travel through the Jordan River basin to avoid Samaria. Why? Because Jews and Samaritans didn't get along to say the least. You might go so far as to say they hated each other, and the hate was mutual, which is both strange and predictable.

You see Jews and Samaritans were all part of Jacob's family. Samaritans descended from the Northern tribes of Israel, while Jews descended from the southern. They worshiped the same God. They shared the same Scriptures. They were both ruled by one foreign occupying empire after another. With so much in common, you'd think that Jews and Samaritans would be allies. But sadly, that's not how it works. You see, it's the people we are closest to who receive our deepest disdain. We see that in the church, in our families, and in ourselves. The worst fights you've ever had aren't with strangers but with the people you're closest to and with yourself. Jesus wants to heal all that.

On the surface, Jesus has no reason to go through Samaria, but John says he has to go. Why? Because God so loved the world, and do you know what's in the world? Samaria. It's a long walk from Judea to Galilee, and Jesus stops by a well in Sychar, but not just any well. He goes to Jacob's well, the common ancestor of Jews and Samaritans. In the bright noon sun, a tired and thirsty Jesus tells a Samaritan woman, "Give me a drink." **[Painting]** In a moment of vulnerability and mutuality, Jesus, who is God in the flesh asks a stranger for help. Can you give me a drink? She's taken aback because, Jews don't talk to Samaritans, but this one does. This is the meet-cute moment. What do I mean by that? Well, if you turned on a movie tonight, and there were two people busy in their workplace who had no time for love, but as they briskly walk toward their next meeting, they bump into each other, and papers fly everywhere. As they furiously pick up the mess, suddenly their eyes meet. Now, what kind of movie are you watching? It's a rom com, right? Well, in the Bible, when a man and a woman meet at a well, that's the place for romance.

Whose well are we at, do you remember? Jacob's well, the same well where he meets Rachel, the love of his life in Genesis 29. Jacob's father was Isaac, the son of Abraham, and when Abraham's servant goes on a mission to find a wife for Isaac, where does he meet Rebecca? At a well. When Moses meets his wife Zipporah in the book of Exodus, where do they meet? At a well. Do you see the pattern? Wells are the place for romance in scripture, and here two unlikely people meet each other. Could it be that love is in the air?

Now before that makes you uncomfortable, let me remind you of a secret about the Gospel of John. In this Gospel, everything is symbolic. When you take it literally, you always miss the point. Last week, Jesus told Nicodemus, you must be born again, and Nicodemus says, "You mean I need to reenter my mother's womb?" Nope, he's taking Jesus literally, when Jesus is speaking in metaphor. That happens all over John's Gospel. When we take things literally, we miss the point, but when we look past the surface, we can see the truth. What we have here is a romance story between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, but don't take it literally. It's a symbolic romance, a spiritual reunion.

Now, why would John tell us a story about a symbolic romance between Jesus and a Samaritan woman? What is it symbolic of? Remember, Jews and Samaritans didn't like each other. You might even call it hatred. The reason Jews disliked Samaritans is because they were no longer considered pure Israelites. In 722BC the Assyrian Empire conquered Samaria, exiling thousands of Israelites away from their homeland. At the same time Assyria forcibly brought people from five other nations to live in Samaria. You can read about it in 2 Kings 17. Why would an empire bother to do this? It's cultural genocide, a way to root out the customs and practices of conquered peoples so they only show allegiance to their overlords. Over the 700 years between these events and time of Christ, the Samaritans intermarried with the people of those five other nations, causing the Jews to look upon their northern siblings as impure.

It's with seven centuries of prejudice and mistrust in the background that Jesus asks a Samaritan woman for a drink, and in doing so, he's symbolically reuniting a family that has been torn apart for too long. Jesus says to her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is speaking to you, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." She says, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty again." This woman whose people have been exiled and estranged from their siblings for 700 years now longs to be satisfied by Jesus' living water. This is a healing story of romance.

Jesus says to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." She responds, "I have no husband." Jesus says, "That's true. You've had five husbands, and the one you are with now is not your husband." If we take this story literally, we think Jesus is somehow exposing this woman's lurid sexual past. But this approach forgets that Jesus never shows interest in anyone's sex life in all four Gospels, except to dignify those whom religion has shamed. That's what's going on here too. In this symbolic story of reunion, the Samaritan woman's five husbands represent the five nations the Assyrians forcibly moved into Samaria according to 2 Kings 17:24, and the man she's living with now is the Roman Empire, who wants nothing to do with her except dominate her.

According to the cultural and religious assumptions of the time, Samaria was a nation of half-bred, outcast heretics. But not to Jesus. He doesn't look down on her for having had five husbands. It's part of her story, one in which she did what she needed to survive. Jesus knows who she is. She is the beloved of God. Just like Jacob met his beloved Rachel at this very well in the book of Genesis, Jesus meets Samaria at the same place and longs for her to know that she is outcast no more. Like in every great romance story, they are meant to be together.

Now, what does this have to do with you and me? Everything. It has everything to do with us. Because it's not just first century Jews and Samaritans who have a history of strained relationships. We all do. And it's not just Samaria whose been outcast and mistreated by their siblings. We all have parts of our families and parts of ourselves that have been outcast and

shamed. But it doesn't have to stay that way. When we drink from God's living water, we learn to trust that those parts of our families and those parts of ourselves that have been exiled, they are beloved too. When we see our trauma stories not with shame but with compassion, we are made whole again. We can live in the assurance that we are both fully known and fully loved, and that kind of love is what heals us.

Once we've tasted grace we'll say with the Samaritan woman, "Come, and see someone who told me everything I have ever done, and instead of shaming me for it, he loves me for it." In the end, that's what we're all thirsty for, to be known and loved, and that's what God offers to all who've been exiled. This grace is so potent and so healing that it can save the world. So, let me ask you, are you thirsty?