

THE MINISTRY OF PRESENCE: 21ST CENTURY WELLS

John 4: 1-14

October 6 and 7, 2018

So we find Jesus by a well in Sychar, tired out from his round-a-bout journey. And we know right away that something significant is about to happen. Not only because Jesus has set out to fulfill his mission, but because he has stopped at a well. At Jacob's well, to be precise. At the very well where Jacob met his beloved bride, Rachel. The Gospel writer is setting the stage for a significant encounter.

The encounter is with a nameless woman coming to draw water in the heat of the day. A Samaritan Woman. Later in the story, we find out she's a five-time widow, or — more likely — a five-time divorcee — cast off by multiple men. A woman who comes to the well at high noon because none of the other Samaritan women want anything to do with her. This is a woman on the margins, even of her own community. An outcast. A woman no one loves.

Jesus strikes up conversation: "Can I have a drink?" It's a simple request ... but one that conveys so much more than his thirst: it conveys vulnerability. His question levels the playing field just enough that this Jewish man and this Samaritan woman can actually have a conversation. He takes a risk that begins a relationship.

It surprises the heck out of this Woman at the Well. Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans, after all. Samaritans and Jews do not engage in social interaction—

they were separated by an unfortunate cultural divide. How could a Jewish man ask a Samaritan woman for a drink!

But, undeterred by the woman's reticence, Jesus continues. He offers her Living Water. Forget the fact that Jews despise Samaritans. Forget the fact that Samaritans didn't worship at the temple. Forget the fact that single men do not converse with scorned women. Forget the barriers and the stereotypes — there is something precious to be found here. And, it's something that satisfies the soul far more than water could ever satisfy thirst: It's the love and grace of God. And, it flows in abundance here at the well.

If we read on in the rest of this story, this encounter at the well with Jesus transforms this woman. Jesus has deemed her worthy of revelation, worthy of love. And this emboldens her. Her thirst has been quenched; she has drunk deeply from the well of grace. So this woman returns to the community that has rejected her: "Come and see!" she says. Come and see the One who knows everything about me, and loves me still. Come and see the One who offers living water! Come and see the Savior.

Had Jesus not stopped at the public, common "well," how likely would it have been for this conversation to take place?

I wonder what would have happened if this woman had come to draw water in 21st Century America. Upon seeing her approach the well, how many of us would have pulled out our phones and tried to avoid eye contact? How many

would have hurried along, too busy to stop and share a conversation?

It's critical to our mission to create space for authentic conversation at 21st century wells. The ministry of presence is the ministry we are called to in this world as we create spaces (in multiple places) by which relationships of Christian authenticity might emerge.¹

In the 21st century, for so many reasons we may or may not understand, it may be difficult and even risky for some folks to enter what at one time—the church building -- was a safe place for relational engagement. So, the burden to step out of our comfort zones and meet people at “the well,” falls on those who are called to be “Christ-like” in the world.

Author Henri Nouwen offers some sound advice about what it means to take a risk and enter into relationships of trust, to create spaces that help people come to know the love, reconciliation, grace, mercy, and life everlasting, present in Christ, in us. He writes:

More and more, the desire grows in me simply to walk around, greet people, enter their homes, sit on their doorsteps, play ball, throw water, and be known as someone who wants to live with them. It is a privilege to have the time to practice this simple ministry of presence. Still, it is not as simple as it seems. My own desire to be useful, to do something significant, or to be part of some impressive project is so strong that soon my time is taken up

by meetings, conferences, study groups, and workshops that prevent me from walking the streets. It is difficult not to have plans, not to organize people around an urgent cause, and not to feel that you are working directly for social progress. But I wonder more and more if the first thing shouldn't be to know people by name, to eat and drink with them, to listen to their stories and tell your own, and to let them know with words, handshakes, and hugs that you do not simply like them, but truly love them.¹

There are plenty of wells in this world ... Some are tables, where you learn from others about life. Some are community garden plots, or on our front lawns, where you meet the neighbor who has never felt comfortable walking inside a church. Some are seats on the bus where you sit with someone and listen — and I mean really listen. Some are chairs beside the fireplace at the retirement home, where you swap stories with the woman whose family never comes to visit ... Some are aisles in the grocery store... in the waiting room... at soccer practice.

Where is the well for you? What place allows for an encounter that just might prove significant? What is the site that quenches another's thirst? Wherever the well is for you, we are called: To sit down and linger. To wait and watch for opportunities to offer grace. To look beyond stereotypes and barriers, and to invite another into relationship. To share the living water we have received from the Savior of the world, and to feast on the good news together ... And, with the Spirit's help, our words and deeds

will reflect Christ to another. And, by the grace of God, Christ will be revealed to us too.²

Let us pray:

Eternal God, the Samaritan woman approached the well in need. At the bottom of the well was the spring-fed water she desired to quench her thirst. God of compassion, we are grateful that Jesus reached out to this woman, and did not allow the barriers to silence him. He recognized her need and reached out to her. He showed her respect and goodwill. He tapped your living water in her that sent her scurrying to share the good news with others.

Lord, deep within us – down deep in our souls – your living water flows. It is the life-blood that pulses throughout every fiber of our being. It is your grace that embraces us and your forgiveness that cleanses us. It is your joy that bubbles up within. It is the surge that pushes us to reach out to others.

Mighty God, there are many dehydrated souls in search of a well. There are many who are parched and dry – their souls so withered that they have become cynical and despairing.

May your living water within us stir our desire to seek our 21st century wells, places where dehydrated souls can encounter authentic relationships and be drenched with love and understanding, and acceptance. For we know that your living water within us is not to be held back, but to be poured out so that all may drink deeply of the living water you offer to the world. Amen.

¹ <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/3698/21st-century-wells-christian-community-in-the-third-place>

² <http://www.wpc.org/uploads/sermons/pdf/March19NiesenThompson2017.pdf>