

Exodus 17:1-7

Luke 4:1-42

March 12, 2023

Third Sunday of Lent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

**A GOSPEL ITINERARY FOR LENT: THE WELL
“The Witness at the Well”**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On next Friday, March 17, the fourth Friday of Lent, residents of the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca will celebrate the festival of Día de la Samaritana or Samaritan Day. State historical records indicate the tradition began in the 19th century when Roman Catholic priests at the Temple of Saint Francis and the Temple of Our Lady of Mercy in Oaxaca de Juárez gave water to worshipers who attended mass three weeks before Good Friday. Today, the celebration continues, but now businesses, schools, and government offices also offer a wide variety of traditional Oaxacan drinks such as horchata (a drink made of rice soaked in milk and flavored with cinnamon and sugar – delicious!), jamaica (made with dried hibiscus flowers – also delicious!), tamarindo (a sweet and sour cross between lemons, apricots, and dates), chilacayote (made with squash and pineapple pulp sweetened with cinnamon and honey), and sandia (watermelon). The Oaxacan tradition is based on today’s gospel story in which the Samaritan woman offered water to Jesus at the well. So, on Friday, Día de la Samaritana, anyone who passes by one of the wells (real or decorative) in Oaxaca is given a drink.

Even though the woman in John’s gospel story is unnamed, various religious traditions have named her St. Photini, which means “The Enlightened.” According to tradition, after meeting Jesus at the well, Photini was baptized on the day of Pentecost, along with her five sisters and two brothers. She had a missionary career and preached the good news of the Messiah’s coming. In Greek sermons from the 4th through the 14th centuries, she was called an “apostle” and “evangelist” and was compared favorably (even surpassing) the male disciples and apostles. Again, according to legend, St. Photini died a martyr under the Roman Emperor Nero.

Two hymns from the Orthodox tradition describe the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. One is a troparion to St. Photini (a troparion is a short hymn of one stanza): “Illuminated by

the Holy Spirit, All-Glorious One, from Christ the Savior you drank the water of salvation. With open hand you give it to those who thirst. Great-Martyr Photini, Equal-to-the-Apostles, pray to Christ for the salvation of our souls.” The other song is from a kontakion or poetic sermon with many stanzas, this one addressed to Jesus Messiah: “O Almighty Savior, Who did pour forth water for the Hebrews from a solid rock: You did come to the Land of Samaria, and addressed a woman, whom You did attract to faith in You, and she has now attained life in the heavens everlastingly.”

Now, that’s far more information about the woman at the well than John himself gives us in today’s gospel story. Unfortunately, through the many years, this Samaritan woman has gained a suspect reputation (maybe through no fault of her own) which is based on two Bible verses, John 4:17-18: “The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, “I have no husband”; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.’” There may be several explanations why the woman had five husbands. John doesn’t tell us, nor does Jesus dwell on that fact nor berate her for it. Instead, his knowledge of her past life opens the door for a deep theological discussion that ends with the unnamed Samaritan woman becoming the first evangelist in the gospels.

If we get too caught up in the Samaritan woman’s past life, we miss the more important new life she received from Jesus. In an article in *The Christian Century*, Fred Craddock wrote, “If any wish to be fascinated by this woman, let them be so now. She is a witness, but not a likely witness and not even a thorough witness. ‘A man who told me all that I ever did’ is not exactly a recitation of the Apostles’ Creed. She is not even a convinced witness: ‘Can this be the Christ?’ is literally ‘This cannot be the Christ, can it?’ Even so, her witness is enough: it is invitational (come and see), not judgmental; it is within the range permitted by her experience; it is honest with its own uncertainty; it is for everyone who will hear. How refreshing. Her witness avoids triumphalism, hawking someone else’s conclusions, packaged answers to unasked questions, thinly veiled ultimatums and threats of hell, and assumptions of certainty on theological matters. She does convey, however, her willingness to let her readers arrive at their own affirmations about Jesus, and they do: ‘This is indeed the Savior of the world.’ John immortalizes her by giving to her witness a name which is the very term with which he began Gospel. The Samaritan woman, the Greek text reads, spoke ‘the Word.’”¹

Among the many interesting details in this story, one in particular has captured people's attention – verse 28, “Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city.” Why did she leave her water jar there at the well? Some say she was so excited and overwhelmed by her conversation with Jesus, she hurried off without her jar. Others say she left it at the well because she knew she was going to come back to the well with her neighbors to see Jesus again. Still others suggest that the woman doesn't need the jar any longer, since she received the “living water” from Jesus and, as the troparion to St. Photini says, “with open hand you give it to those who thirst.”

That third interpretation reminded me of a story. Long ago and in a faraway place, a water bearer had two large pots. Each was hung on the end of a pole, which he carried across his back. One pot was perfect. The other had a crack in it. The cracked pot was only half full at the end of the long walk from the stream to the house. The pot was very sad about its imperfection. After two years, the pot spoke to the water bearer. “I am a failure and ashamed that my crack has let water leak out all the way back to the house.” The water bearer said, “Did you notice there are flowers only on your side of the path? That's because I have always known about your flaw. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path. You have watered them every day while we walk back from the stream. For two years, I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table. Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house.”²

In that same vein, Linda McKinnish Bridges writes, “The nameless Samaritan woman who left her waterpot at the well has become herself a vessel for the gospel. Her life and testimony become the conduit for the redemption of her Samaritan relatives and friends. Her life, a clay pot, now contains the great treasure, and she shares it with others. . . No longer does she need the container for her daily life, for her life has become the pitcher that contains Christ's living water for the world. In her testimony she offers an opportunity to taste the water that will quench people's thirst and restore their souls.”³

As always, what does this gospel story have to do with us? Well, I can think of two ways we can relate to the woman at the well.

First, we all share the physical need for water to survive. But, beyond that, we all have that deep thirst for the living water only Jesus can give, even when aren't aware of our need. The Samaritan woman went to the well at high noon to fetch a jar of water. She ended up getting more than she ever expected.

In 1986, the internationally known poet and hymn-writer Brian Wren published “I Have No Bucket and the Well Is Deep.” His song certainly describes the unexpected encounter at Jacob’s Well at Sychar, but it also speaks to our lives when we are parched and nothing else in this life can slake our thirst.

*I have no bucket, and the well is deep.
My thirst is endless, and my throat is dry.
I ask you, stranger, silent at my side,
can words refresh my longings if you speak?
I have no bucket, and the well is deep.*

*Can love unbar the strongrooms of the mind
and scour the tombs and warrens underground
for toys and treasures lost, or never found,
for all I cannot name, yet ache to find?
I have no bucket, and the well is deep.*

*Who are you, strange yet friendly at my side,
and can you see and judge, yet understand
my hidden self, and heal with wounded hands?
Are you the path, the gateway and the guide,
the keys, the living water, and the light?*

*Come break the rock, and bid the rivers flow
from deep unending wells of joy and worth,
for tears, for drinking, drowning and new birth,
and I shall find and give myself, and know
the keys, the living water, and the light.*

A second way we can relate to the Samaritan woman at the well is to decide what we’re going to do when we find the living water. That unnamed woman left her water jar at the well. With open hand she gave the living water to those who thirsted. And they said, “We have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.” And suddenly, the outcast, marginalized, suspect Samaritans bear witness to what may be the most famous verse in John’s gospel and, for that matter, the whole Bible: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16) – or, to use the imagery of today’s gospel story, “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.” (John 4:14)

The unnamed woman at the well is rightly known as the first witness, the first evangelist, if you will. “Evangelism” is a scary word for many of us, isn’t it? But listen again to what Linda McKinnish Bridges says about what we can learn from the woman/witness at the well: “Evangelism is allowing one’s life to be the conduit of God’s grace for another. Our name or family pedigree does not matter. Our past history is of no particular concern. All that God requires is willing vessels who will leave behind the past and walk boldly into the future, carrying the living water of God’s forgiveness and mercy in their lives. A nameless woman from Samaria walks before us . . . as a paradigm for evangelism. May we follow in her steps.”⁴

There is a story about sailors on a vessel in the South Atlantic Ocean who signaled for assistance from another nearby vessel: “Help! Save us, or we perish for lack of water!” The captain of the other vessel replied, “Cast down your buckets where you are.” Supposing that the second captain had not gotten the message accurately, the troubled ship signaled yet again, “Help! Save us, or we perish for lack of water!” Again, the nearby ship signaled back, “Cast down your buckets where you are!” This exchange went on until the sailors on the first ship, in desperation, decided they had nothing to lose by following this outlandish advice. When crew members cast down their buckets, they drew them up filled with clear, cool, sparkling water. They had not realized that the powerful current of the Amazon River, where it empties into the Atlantic Ocean, carries fresh water from the South American rain forests many miles out into the South Atlantic Ocean.⁵

The United Methodist Church hymnal, *Worship & Song*, has a song called “Fill My Cup, Lord,” which is described this way: “The stanzas speak to the need of the individual and the world to seek and find, not the passing pleasures of daily living, but rather the blessing and fullness of life in Christ.” The second verse and refrain make a fitting closing to this sermon:

There are millions in this world who are craving

The pleasures earthly things afford;

But none can match the wondrous treasure

That I find in Jesus Christ my Lord.

Fill my cup, Lord, I lift it up, Lord!

Come and quench this thirsting of my soul;

Bread of heaven, Feed me till I want no more –

Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole!

Cast down your buckets where you are and find the living water. And then carry that living water in your lives and share it with people who are thirsty.

Let us pray: For the word of hope that pours over us like living water, for the word of grace that leads us to encounter the living Christ, we offer you our thanks, O God. Amen.

NOTES

¹Fred B. Craddock, "The Witness at the Well (Jn. 4:5-42)," March 7, 1990, p. 243 at www.christiancentury.org.

²"The story of two water pots," April 5, 2017 at www.royalexaminer.com.

³Linda McKinnish Bridges, "John 4:5-42," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, April 1994, 48/2, p. 176.

⁴Ibid.

⁵This version of the story is adapted from Melanie L. McCarley, "The well is deep...and you have no bucket,"³ Lent.A.2017, John 4:5-42 at www.stpauls-dedham.org.