

SERMON
“The Woman at the Well: Grace for the Ashamed”
John 4:7-26
Sunday, March 12, 2023

The pastor and his family were invited to Easter dinner at the Wilson home. Mrs. Wilson was widely known for her amazing contributions to church potlucks.

Everyone was seated around the table as the food was being served. As usual, it was a feast for the eyes, the nose, and the palate.

When the pastor’s youngest son, Peter, received his plate he started eating right away.

“Peter, wait until we say grace,” insisted his embarrassed father.

“I don’t have to,” the five-year-old replied.

“Of course, you do, Peter,” his mother insisted rather forcefully. “We always say a prayer before eating at our house.”

“That’s at our house,” Peter explained, “but this is Mrs. Wilson’s house, and she knows how to cook.”

Theologian Michael Hoy says that when we live in denial we live in isolation. “*When we have something so difficult to bear that either we do not wish to burden others with it, or we are so ashamed of it that we keep it buried;*” says Hoy, “*we become a prisoner of fear, doubt, and anxiety.*”

So how do we become free? Free to live beyond the doubt, the fear, the isolation, and the anxiety of our shame? Maybe, just maybe, we all need to have a little five-year-old Peter at our table to set us free. Hoy suggests that our freedom comes by the grace and forgiveness we encounter with Jesus Christ.

Consider our scripture passage for this morning in which a Samaritan woman living in fear, doubt, and shame encountered grace as she came to the well to draw water. Biblical scholars insist that her fear, doubt, and shame are made evident by the timestamp she came to the well. The Gospel of John says she arrived at the well around noon. Most other women would have already come to the well earlier in the day to draw water. She came around noon to avoid being seen. She came when the sun was not only at its highest zenith but when its temperature was the most brutal. She came not because it was convenient for her schedule; she came because of her shame. William Barclay in his commentary on this text says that she was so much of a moral failure that the other Samaritan women who were outcasts themselves banned her from going to the well with them.

Imagine her awkward surprise to find someone there by the side of the well! To make matters worse, the one sitting there was a man. She did not realize who this man was, that it was Jesus. Nor did she know that he was tired from a long journey, while his disciples were off in the city getting some food. She just wasn’t expecting this encounter, or any encounter.

Complicating this rather awkward situation, the woman recognizes that Jesus is not just any man, but that he is a Jewish man. She is a Samaritan. And Jews and Samaritans didn’t exactly get along. There were many prejudices, divisions, even hostilities between them. Of course, we all know something about prejudices, divisions, and hostilities in our own time and in our own lives. In fact, we often avoid these situations. But, as we will see, says Hoy, “*grace makes unexpected encounters.*”

As if it is not bad enough for this poor woman in this particular setting to be caught out at noon looking for water, and then encountering this male Jewish stranger, that this man (whom we know is Jesus) now has the audacity to speak directly to her, and with a command: “*Give me a drink.*” Commentators agree, given the social and religious customs of his day, Jesus knew better not to speak with any Samaritan, let alone be seen with one. But here he is; not only conversing with a Samaritan; but sitting at a well with an outcast among outcasts.

From our side of the well; however, we know that this very unexpected and awkward encounter is a moment in which grace comes to this woman. At first, she doesn’t see it that way; in fact, she makes a point of it, putting up the barriers that not only divided their genders, but have divided their peoples for centuries: “*How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?*” But that’s not all she is doing, suggests Hoy, she is also creating barriers in which she can hide her failures and shame.

Most of us would be silenced by such a quick come back, maybe even apologetic. But Jesus is not put off to

the point of leaving the woman alone. He knows that she already has so much of that being alone, that loneliness, going on in her life. And it's not exactly that she is alone in that, either. Loneliness also consumes us today. Instead, he dares to speak to her yet again, further extending grace her way: *"If you knew the grace 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."*

The woman becomes intrigued. At the mention of living water, she wonders where it possibly could be. Where are these so-called flowing streams of living water so that I no longer have to be constrained..., so that I no longer have to keep coming to this well day after day, always in hiding...always being reminded of my failures, loneliness and shame?

I am reminded of a story that is accredited to Mark Twain of an enslaved man who went to sleep one night on a narrow neck of land in Missouri, that jutted out into the Mississippi River. That night there was a great storm, and the river cut a new channel, right through the neck of land. When the man awoke the next morning, he found himself no longer in Missouri, but in Illinois — a free man! The rushing water had freed him.

It is water such as this that begins to give this Samaritan woman at the well hope. William Barclay reminds us that whereas the well at which the woman drew water was a well in which the water percolated from the subsoil; the living water that Jesus referenced *"is running water that flows freely like that of a mighty river."*

"Give me this water," we hear her say with relief in her voice, *"so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."* Hoy says of her words: *"She dares to trust that Jesus may not only know where such living water is, but that he himself can actually provide it."*

So, he says to her, *"Go, call your husband, and come back."*

"I have no husband."

What comes next is not accusatory or judgmental; it is simply a statement of fact: *"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. What you have said is true!"* Some scholars argue that this not a reference to the five husbands she has had but the false idols to which she has clung to. Either way, this is a moment for her freedom—her freedom from shame, from fear, from hostility, from division.

For the first time in her life, someone is speaking to her — not to embarrass her, not to make her feel anymore awkward than she already does — but to free her; to give her the courage to stand in truth. He looks upon her not with shame, but with grace. William Barclay says of this amazing story: *"Here was the Son of God, tired and weary and thirsty. Here was the holiest of men, listening with understanding to a sorry story. Here was Jesus breaking through the barriers of nationality and orthodox Jewish custom. Here is the beginning of the universality of the gospel; here is God so loving the world, not in theory, but in action."*

Henri Nouwen, in his book *Bread for the Journey* reminds us that all kinds of voices are asking for our attention: *"There is a voice that says, 'Prove that you are a good person.'*

Another voice says, 'You'd better be ashamed of yourself.'

There also is a voice that says, 'Nobody really cares about you,' and one that says, 'Be sure to become successful, popular and powerful.'

But underneath all these often very noisy voices; is a still small voice that says, 'You are my Beloved; my favor rests on you.' That's the voice we need most of all to hear."

"But to hear that voice," warns Nouwen, *"requires special effort; it requires solitude, silence, and a strong determination to listen."*

Like the woman at the well, how many of us still live with deep, buried, dark secrets and skeletons in our closet? Who among us isn't afraid of the whole truth and nothing but the truth being disclosed? Who among us is afraid of the criticism and judgment? Afraid of being mocked or scorned by others? Like the Samaritan that's why we keep them hidden, away from others, for fear of being discovered. But even for us, Jesus does not look upon us with shame; he looks upon us with his grace.