

The Woman at the Well

John 4:5-42

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

Please be seated. For the next few weeks we are going to have really long passages for our Gospel readings. They are so long in fact I thought that perhaps at these times you can all be seated before we read the entire text.

Today's Gospel comes from John's retelling of Jesus' meeting with the woman at the well. Now before we read it I want to remind you all of a few things.

We have two battling sides in this John Text. Much of John is symbolic and shows the struggle between earthly things and heavenly things, man's kingdom and God's Kingdom. Here we have two different people of faith. On one side we have Jesus a Jewish Rabbi and on the other a woman with a disreputable lifestyle and that is a Samaritan.

Historically speaking, some of the differences between these two groups went back to the Babylonian exile in 587 B.C. In that year Babylonian conquered the last of the Israel tribes. Before that the Northern part of Israel had fallen and in 587 the Southern kingdom that was mostly of the tribe of Judah, the area in which Jerusalem was centered also was attacked and destroyed. The capital was leveled. The temple of God torn down. And Entire families were taken away as slaves back to Babylonian. So many of the Jews were kept from their homeland and over that time of captivity they struggled to remain faithful to God, to seek God's salvation and hear the words of the coming Messiah who would save his people. Within a few decades, a new King came to power in Babylon that allowed the captured Jews to return to the promised land. So within 70 years much of the Jewish nation was once again returning from captivity, up along the Tigris River and back down into the promised land. And as these exiled Jews, who had struggled to keep the faith in captivity returned to their homes they came across other Jews who had not been captured, perhaps they had fled or hidden. Whatever the reason when the Babylonian army had marched in these Jews escaped capture. But while the Jews that were enslaved fought to keep their faith, the ones left behind didn't. They intermarried with other peoples of the area. They started to adopt some of the other people's customs and beliefs. They started worship differently and at different places. They had changed and to the returning Jews who had suffered for their faith and been enslaved keeping themselves pure in the eyes of God, these remaining Jews in the region of Samaria were unclean and impure, dirty, traitors, scum.

When the returning Jews started to rebuild their cities they didn't welcome in these people of Samaria. When they rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, they refused to allow these Jews of Samaria to step foot on the temple mount. As a result of this shunning, the people of Samaria built their own worship site at Mount Gerizim, North of Jerusalem in their own region where they would be welcomed.

And so over the years that followed their rift become bigger and bigger as they were separated from each other by worship, family, business, and any type of relationship. Even faith started to divide. The Returning Jews believed God was still talking through the prophets, the ones like Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, ones who had predicted the downfall of Israel, their capture, their return and the coming messiah. They read the words of their kings, in the Psalms by David and Wisdom of Solomon. But the Jews of Samaria refused to listen to any of those people and only worshipped and read the Torah, the first five books of Moses – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. And so the divide between the two groups by Jesus day was out and out hatred. A Jew and a Samaritan just did not have any relationship, no talking, no touching, no asking each other for favors, nothing!

And besides all this we have in our story a woman that has a disreputable lifestyle. She is out at the well in mid-day, the sixth hour from sunrise, that around 12 noon. Most women, mothers, wives, homemakers would have been out at the well early in the day, before the heat of the day is too much, and before having to begin work for the day. It was almost as much a necessity to get the day's water as it was a chance to socialize and talk. But this woman was not part of that circle, she had a reputation that made her have to go out later in the morning, after scornful eyes had all left and she could do what she had to do without feeling the hatred of her neighbors.

So we have two different groups of people, Samaritans and Jews, we have a unclean, social outcast, totally disreputable woman and we have Jesus a Jewish teacher, rabbi, leader. And we also have in this reading two styles of worship: True worship and false worship. People get tied to a place, to ritual, to false beliefs, but Jesus contents that we are to worship God in spirit and truth. There is false worship when people are ignorant of God. Sometimes people start with emotional responses seeking what they want, what they like, what they desire. But Jesus contents that God has given us the truth and the spirit to empower us to grow in the faith, to seek out God, to thirst for him, and to not sit passively and say I am saved, but to grow and expand our relationship with God. Jesus was also speaking against superstitious worship or fear, the old adage just in case faith. What Jesus is speaking about is a God who is spirit and truth. God is not confined to things, not idols, or nature, not places, or limits of time of worship.

What Jesus is calling us to listen and hear is that God speaks to us in Spirit and Truth and that we are to respond in spirit, opening ourselves up to God and sharing that truth and love. Even the woman opens herself up in response to Jesus, to share that faith, that love, that spirit with others, to be a worshiper in truth and not a false worshiper.

Now listen to the Gospel reading, picture the comparisons made in this reading, hear the words of truth, and hope that Jesus says to these people of division, these people of sinfulness, these people of false worship. Hear his call to be a people of unity, of purity, of true worship.

Hear the words of the Gospel:

(Jesus) came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 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.) 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 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." 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."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." 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. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 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. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." 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." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

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?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "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.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. 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. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. 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."

This is the Gospel of Our Lord. Amen.