

Jeff Paschal

"Lively Water" GPPC 3-15-20, rev  
Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:5-42

When I was an adolescent in the early 1970s, sometimes I used to watch *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* on TV. The show was funny and sometimes poignant as it showed the challenges of women taking greater leadership roles in the workplace in a sexist society. The smart, beautiful, compassionate, witty Mary worked as an associate producer at a television station in Minneapolis. Her gruff but kind boss was Lou Grant played by Ed Asner. In one scene, actually her interview for the position, Mary argues with Mr. Grant and finally he says, "You know what? You've got spunk." And Mary shrugs, smiles, looks away and says, "Well, yes . . ." And Mr. Grant says, "I hate spunk."

It makes me think of a certain Samaritan woman.

Jesus travels into a Samaritan city. And you may recall that Jews and Samaritans of the time despise each other, a longstanding religious feud. So Jesus is marching right into enemy territory in broad daylight, at midday no less. And he's tired and thirsty. So Jesus sits down beside an ancient well, Jacob's well.

Out comes a Samaritan woman to draw water from the well. Now this is

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a strange time of day for her to be there, in the heat of the day, but then again, much of this story is strange. Jesus says to her, “Give me a drink.” And with those few words Jesus explodes the religious and cultural norms of the time. The expectation is that Jewish men don’t talk to women in public, especially *Samaritan* women. And this Samaritan woman knows Jesus is out of line. She says, “What? You, a Jewish man, asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink—what’s up with that, buddy?” And Jesus says, “If you really knew the gift God’s trying to give you, you’d have asked this Jewish man and he would’ve given you living water.”

Well, this Samaritan woman has spunk. “Living water? You don’t even have a bucket and this well’s deep! Living water, right.” As happens so often in John’s gospel, the person talking with Jesus misunderstands, because Jesus speaks on a spiritual plane of existence and the person talking hears on an ordinary plane of existence. So Jesus tries again. He says, “Everybody who drinks from Jacob’s well is going to get thirsty again. But the water I’m offering will become in them a spring, gushing, leaping up to eternal life.”

Living water, it can even be translated as “lively water.” What in the world does Jesus mean? Neither John nor Jesus gives us a clear, succinct

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definition. But the story itself provides us clues.

The woman, still not quite understanding, says, “Give me that living water. I’m tired of getting thirsty and having to come back here to fill up.” Jesus says, “Go get your husband and come back.” And she says, “I’m not married.” Jesus says, “Right. You’ve been married five times and you’re living with a man right now.”

So this Samaritan woman wants the living water Jesus offers, even though she still doesn’t quite understand it. She knows she’s thirsty for something. And Jesus has a feisty exchange with her, but he never rejects her or scolds her. He simply points out her five previous husbands and the guy she’s living with now. Is this woman some wild Hollywood type who moves from marriage to marriage like changing clothes? Maybe. Or, more likely, has she suffered through levirate marriage of the time? That is her first husband has died and she has then been “given” to his brother. And this has happened again and again—five brothers, but then the sixth refused to marry her. (See Gail R. O’Day and Susan E. Hulen, *John* in the Westminster Bible Companion Series, 53.) We don’t know. All we know is she’s a Samaritan woman whose history is as untidy as a teenager’s bedroom. All we know is her life is messy, but she’s also thirsty

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for some lively, living water.

And how's your life and how's mine? If we did a life inventory would we find "youthful indiscretions"? Are there skeletons dancing and rattling around in our closets? Even now, are we aware of our self-centeredness, our tendency to gossip and hate, to laziness and despair, to anger and lust, to cold self-righteousness and grumbling? Do we notice how quickly we turn away from Christian commitment to the poor and needy whenever it might be inconvenient or costly? What sins and secrets find safe harbor in our lives?

In November 2004, Frank Warren started an unusual art project named PostSecret. As he says, "I printed three thousand self-addressed postcards inviting people to mail a personal secret to me, anonymously. I handed out the cards to strangers and left them in public places to be discovered." Since that time Warren set up a website, compiled several books, and received hundreds of thousands of self-addressed postcards with anonymous secrets. Some of those secrets are encouraging and hopeful. One person wrote of an unnamed individual, "You will never know that you absolutely changed my life." Another writer declared, "The stuff I own will no longer own me." But most of the secrets are bawdy, shocking, funny, disgusting, illegal, or moving. One

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person revealed, “I have both a . . . wife and a girlfriend and I have never been lonelier!!!” Another admitted, “I ate my daughter’s chocolate Easter bunny . . . and had to rush out at the last minute to buy a replacement.” And still another confessed, “Sometimes I wish I could use the techniques of a Mafia Godfather in my personal & professional life.” But my favorite card was written by somebody from Mississippi who said this, “Every single person has at least one secret that would break your heart. If we could just remember this, I think there would be a lot more compassion and tolerance in the world.” (Frank Warren, *The Secret Lives of Men and Women*, various pages)

Jesus knows about the Samaritan woman’s cluttered past, but he does not condemn her or even spend any time talking about what’s happened. And the woman herself immediately moves from that knowledge into a liturgical debate. She says, “Sir, I see you’re a prophet, God’s messenger. Now my ancestors (Samaritans) worshiped God on this mountain, but your ancestors (Jews) insisted worship was supposed to happen in Jerusalem.” In other words, “Okay, Jesus. You know about my five husbands and the live-in guy too. Now what do you have to say about proper worship? Got any wisdom there?”

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And Jesus does have wisdom. He says, “Right worship is not really about location on the mountain or in Jerusalem. Right worship is about how we approach God truly focused on God and molded by God’s Spirit. Right worship is about being centered on God not ourselves for a while.”

Of course, the preacher tries to make the sermon faithful and interesting. Certainly the music directors, choirs and accompanists attempt to make the music faith-inspiring and beautiful. But worship is not finally about us, what we like, or what we can construct and deliver. Worship is about being centered, focused, led by the God revealed in Jesus. As the woman says to Jesus, “I know the Messiah is coming, and he’s going to tell us everything.” And Jesus says, “I am he.”

Do you hear that lively water springing up in the story? The lively water washes us with the knowledge that God revealed in Jesus breaks down the barriers between the so-called “good” people and “bad” people. Jesus comes barging right into enemy country, asking the enemy for help, naming her untidy life, but loving her unconditionally.

And that’s what Jesus does for you and me even though we often think we can cover our sins so well behind our sunny smiles, our neatly pressed clothes, and our fancy titles. Jesus plops down beside us and says, “Yeah, I

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know about you. I know you completely. I know the times you've followed me closely, done the hard things, taken up your cross to follow, spoken the truth in love, worked for justice, forgiven others, poured yourself out. I know that. And I know the times you've turned away from me, chosen pettiness and anger, and selfishness and greed. I know it all. But I love you absolutely. I love you as if you were the only person in the world." And if the God we know in Jesus loves us this way, then in an age of Coronavirus, we can live with trust that no matter what happens, ultimately we will be safe in God's hands. And with that knowledge we are invited to treat each other with even more compassion.

Then there is a last gushing fountain in the story. The woman begins to realize something about this Jesus who knows all and forgives all, who is deserving of devotion and worship. And she does something about it. She tells people about Jesus. And her approach is not some slick, fundamentalist pamphlet jammed under the car's windshield wiper. "If you died tonight, where would you spend eternity?" No. She's kind of clunky and shy and incredulous about the whole thing. She says to people, "Come and see this man who told me everything I've done. He can't be the Messiah, can he?"

That's the last step for us too, isn't it? Of course, it could mean spending some time thinking about who this strange Jesus really is and what God has

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actually done and is doing in our lives. It might mean taking some risk to talk about our faith, despite the scary things happening now. Not being overbearing. Not being arrogant. Just saying, “I met God through this Jesus who knows me and loves me and loves the world. And he reveals a God worthy of my life and worship, God who will never abandon us. He can’t be the Messiah, can he? Can he?”

To God be all glory, honor, and praise forever. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal