

Dear Friends,

This Sunday's Gospel lesson is the story of the Samaritan Woman at the Well. Years ago, I had the opportunity to be part of clergy writing group that met at the Oblate Renewal Center in San Antonio, Texas. The grounds had some beautiful statues scattered throughout the gardens, including this one below of Jesus talking with that woman.

Seeing her life-sized figure, I grew curious about her story. In modern times, we're quick to judge someone having been married five times as immoral or careless in human relationships. But life was so different then, and woman had such little control over theirs, that I've come to believe she was a victim of circumstances beyond her control, and that she had suffered tragedy and heartbreak to have ended up living with a sixth man.

Jesus requests her hospitality. He breaks social, religious, and gender barriers to enter into relationship with her. He invites her into conversation and offers a path to healing. He does the same for each one of us, no matter our backgrounds, our missteps, and our suffering.

Rather than a traditional sermon, I wrote a story imagining the life of this woman, staying as true as I could to scripture and my understanding of the law and customs of the day. I felt a little awkward about standing in front of you all and simply reading aloud my story. I'm sad that we're unable to worship together in person, but I see God's grace and am thankful to have this story to offer to you as we worship in our own ways in our own homes. My prayer is that these words lead you into your own imaginings of the scripture. May we all accept Christ's invitation to drink from the living water.

In his love,

Cathy Warner



The Woman at the Well

You might have thought it odd that I came to the well at noon. You would've thought I'd be serving my family dinner while the sun was full in the sky, that afterward I'd rest on my pallet in the shade, like everyone else who dozed inside our courtyard for an hour or so to escape the heat. You might have thought me careless for running out of water for cooking and washing so early in the day. You might have asked why I didn't come in the morning with the other women from town.

I did come in the cool of the morning, I awoke before dawn as the black sky blued and walked barefoot along the cool dirt path shivering just a bit in my shawl, empty clay jug perched on my shoulder, to this well of my ancestors dug by Jacob, who with his sons, had brought their sheep to drink each day. I filled my bucket and arrived home before the other women woke to a rose and orange sky and headed to the well. The morning became so hot, I worried that my toddling grandchildren would scorch their thighs when they tumbled onto the heat baked earth, so I knotted damp cloths around their chubby legs. Before the sun had reached noon, the young green sprouts in the garden had withered and I poured the last of my jug around their thirsty stalks, hoping to revive them. So it was, that in the midday heat, I returned to the well, still alive after so many years, the water sweet and cool and flowing. I plodded the path toward it again, drawn by twin needs for water and escape. Escape to a shaded gully, escape from the commotion of town.

In town I am an oddity. Of course, anyone who has had five husbands is an oddity and an object of scrutiny. No doubt you have made judgments about me. Everyone has. Out of assumptions, gossip, and half-truths time has a way of writing its own story, a story I had little power to change, because no one knew the full truth of my life. Until today. And now you will know, too.

Hiram was my first husband. A cousin of my cousin, we were betrothed since birth. I don't remember a time before I knew him, a sweet and serious boy who dug worms from the damp earth to feed the chickens in the courtyard. He was twenty when we married; I was fourteen. At our wedding feast he choked on a lamb's rib while dancing with his uncles. I remember watching the joyful circle of men collapse into a knot as Hiram went silent and clutched at his throat. Minutes later, they carried him into the house and then stepped away, heads hung in sorrow. His mother, his aunt, and I prepared his body for burial with spices and linens. It was the first and only time I touched his skin, smooth and brown as an olive. His mother and aunt left me with him for just a moment and I took his heavy hand, kissed his cold lips, rested my warm forehead against his cold one and whispered goodbye. On this day when I should be rejoicing, I was made a widow and unclean.

After my purification, I was married to Hiram's twin brother, Ellis, who was so much like Hiram that I couldn't help but give him my heart. We would sit together at night on the rooftop, watching the stars and Ellis would show me how they traveled across the firmament, slowly circling around us, saying our descendants, like Abraham's would be that numerous, but none came.

Three years after our union, a fire consumed the house. Ellis threw himself into the blaze, to save his mother, who was lame by then. He lifted her from her pallet by the hearth and carried her into the smoky dust of the courtyard, but he could not save her. And I could not save him. The salves and cool rags I applied were unable to soothe his charred body and he began to pray for death, silently mouthing the words. Three days later, God answered Ellis' prayer and he slipped from this world, leaving me without a husband again.

After the requisite mourning the boys' father, Abner, now without a wife, married me. Try as I might, I could not love him. "They are right to have named you Sabra, you prickly pear," he said when I remained sullen in my grief. Yet he persisted in his intentions and soon I was with child. Six months later, I bore twin sons who were small, sickly and would not suckle. Hiram lived two days; Ellis five.

In grief, I built a wall around my heart and Abner did not attempt to scale it. I longed to return to my home, to care for my parents in my loneliness, but my brother Samuel refused, saying we must follow the law and contract that bound me to this family. Years passed and I was twenty-four when Abner took ill. Before his death he arranged for me to be married to his cousin in another village. Soon I became the wife of a stranger. I cooked not to his liking, ran the household not to his standards, and bore him two daughters, whom he considered as worthless as me, and so he divorced me.

By this time my parents were dead, and it seemed I would have to sell my body in order to survive. But my brother's wife, Dinah, begged Samuel to take pity on my daughters and me. We returned to my childhood home. It was good to be somewhere familiar. I tended the garden and kept my babies out of mischief. Two years later news came that the wife of Dinah's brother Zebedee had died in childbirth. Because my youngest daughter was still suckling at my breast, I was sent to nurse the baby Zebulon. Shortly after my arrival Zebedee, asked me to become his wife. I answered yes, though I'd never considered saying no.

Zebedee loved God and he loved me. He treated me with respect as if I were a man, and spoke to me as though I were a scholar. He taught me things I had never learned when I was young and busy sewing, proofing dough, and crushing olives. He told me the history of our people that I'd only heard snippets of before, of the split between us, the people of Samaria, and the Jews and how their troops had destroyed our beloved shrine on Mount Gerizim. How they had ripped the stones from their foundations, threw them down the mountain, and laughed as they tortured us. "Filthy Samaritans. Now you'll realize the only true Temple is in Jerusalem," they'd said. "And it belongs to us, the righteous followers of David." How all this troubled my kind husband's heart.

"We worship the same God," he said. "But our hatred runs deep, and although my heart longs for shalom between our people, I don't believe we'll ever find a way to achieve it."

Through the years, I raised young Zebulon as if he were my own son, and my dearest Zebedee found righteous husbands for my daughters before he passed on. Zebulon has known no other mother, and has promised to provide for me until I too depart from this life. I have a place in his household as nurse to his children and friend to my daughter-in-law Muriel.

Two years ago, Muriel's father was widowed and came to live with us, setting up camp in tent near the goat pasture. Ezra is old, older than me, and at times his mind is simple. He believes me to be his wife. And though my behavior is shocking to some, and the reason many women will not come to the well when I am there. But if I speak truthfully, I can see no great harm in living with Ezra and caring for him as though he and I are husband and wife. It is a comfort to both of us in a life that is often hard.

I tell you this long complicated story of my life and marriages, because I believed my position as a wife defined me, that it made me a person of worth, and that my current deceit rightfully made me an outcast.

I believed that until this scorching afternoon, when I returned to the well and found a certain man sitting there. A Jewish man at that, who was supposed to be my bitter enemy. When I arrived he asked me for a drink of water. He should not have spoken to me. A Jew speaking to a Samaritan; a Rabbi speaking to a woman. Unheard of. My reputation was already questionable. Did he want to do the same thing to himself? Did he want to become an object of ridicule and scorn? I couldn't give him a drink; we'd both violate our laws of purity. I wanted to pretend I hadn't heard him, yet I had to answer him, not just because of the rules of hospitality, but because there was something in his voice that demanded an answer. I could barely speak, my voice a low whisper, my eyes fixed on the ground.

"You, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan woman for a drink?"

He turned my question on its head. "If you knew God, and if you knew who I am, you'd be asking *me* for a drink, and I'd give you living water."

I looked up then, emboldened by his response. I looked him straight in the eyes expecting to see ridicule. But he wasn't being cruel. He looked amused with himself for telling his joke about serving up fresh water without even a bucket. There was something else, a peacefulness, a contentment about him, like I'd seen on Zebedee's face just before he died when he told me his life had been complete because I was in it. This man looked at me as if he were looking into me, could see my heart and its secrets.

I turned my head toward the well and asked, "Are you then a better man than Jacob who gave us this well?"

He laughed and waved his hand toward the well. "Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again; you've got to come back for more every day." He looked at my empty jug and I set it on the ground in between us. "The water I give is alive, inside you. When you taste it, you'll never be thirsty again," he said.

I was quiet for a time, trying to understand what he meant. Certainly, I'd love to have a well within me, so I wouldn't have to trek to this one day in and day out. I'd love never being thirsty. But it couldn't be that simple, I'd still need water for cooking, for washing, and for the garden. I'd still need to come to this well. He ran a finger around the lip of my jug, and in that motion, his hand going around and round the clay-rimmed jug, I felt something inside me begin to fill up. A part of me that had always been empty, a part that even Zebedee hadn't been able to fill.

"Sir, then please give me some of this water, so I'll never be thirsty again," I said.

He smiled at me, not the eager smile of a young boy about to make a conquest, but a slow knowing smile, and he seemed old then, even older than Ezra whose tent I shared. Old as if he'd seen the entire history of this well, of Jacob and his sons, and of our people torn apart by hate. "Go call your husband," he said, "and then come back."

At any other time, I might have tried to keep up appearances. I might have said I was widowed and lived with my son. Or I might have said my husband was infirm and needed his rest. But I couldn't do that. His request had opened up the part of me I tried to keep hidden from the world, all those husbands, all those marriages, all those deaths, all those sorrows, such small joys, so few. So, I simply said, "I have no husband."

He sighed and it seemed as though I'd poured my sadness over him like a cup of water. He absorbed it for a moment, then he spoke. "That is true. You've had five husbands, and are not married to the man you live with now."

I waited for the accusations. I waited for the judgments that always came. I waited so I could explain myself. But I didn't need to. The man stood up, dusted himself off and peered into the well. I felt a burden drop from me, as if he'd looked into my life, seen everything I'd done and found nothing to condemn, nothing to ridicule. He accepted me. A Samaritan. A woman. A woman who'd had five husbands.

We stood together at the well of my ancestors, at the well of his ancestors, and I sensed he was a prophet, that he had a special gift for knowing the truth. And so, emboldened by his presence, and remembering remembered Zebedee and what he'd told me, I asked him where the true place of worship should be and why we were arguing about it. That's when he told me that soon it wouldn't matter what we were called or where we worshipped. That what mattered was the way we lived. That we needed to be alive in worship and come before God with simplicity and honesty, and that we would be filled with spirit.

"But the Messiah is coming and when he does, he'll tell us how to worship," I replied.

Then this man turned away from the well and looked into my eyes. "I am the one you are waiting for," he said.

His words, like a gentle breath, blew away the last rocks I'd piled around my heart. A few tears slipped from my eyes and ran down my cheeks. I wiped them with my sleeve.

"We weep with living water," he said.

In gratitude and relief, I wanted to drop to my knees before him, to drop my face to the dust and offer thanks when I heard a loud yell and turned to follow the sound.

A group of men approached the well, calling out, "Jesus!"

When they saw me, their conversation ceased, and I could feel their accusing stares. Samaritan. Woman. Enemy. Immoral. I was too raw and emotional to face them. Jesus had burst open my damn of grief. I ran away then, back to the village in the midday heat, choking back sobs. I wasn't sure what to do. Part of me wanted to hide in Ezra's tent and weep and never tell anyone what had happened.

Part of me wanted to deny and forget my encounter at the well, to squash these new feelings, because I was terrified. Struggling for breath, my side aching, I finally slowed to a walk and realized I'd left my water jug.

There would be explaining to do, so I might as well tell the truth. I found Ezra and Zebulon and Muriel and told them to follow me. Then we walked to the houses of my daughters and their husbands. I told them my story, the parts they hadn't known.

"There is a man, a prophet at the well who knew all this about me. He didn't condemn me. Somehow, he healed my pain with his living water. He might be the Messiah. Come," I said. "Come to the well with me."

My family believed my story, and we all set off toward the well, setting the village abuzz with talk of Jesus and his knowing, and soon a crowd of people followed us. There at the well, in the shade of late afternoon, we found Jesus and his disciples drinking water from my jug. Zebulon invited them to stay with us and they accepted. For two days they stayed in our Samaritan village, all of us eating and drinking with those who were supposed to be our enemies, those who were supposed to be avoided. But Jesus drew us together and to himself. He taught us about the Kingdom of Heaven, about the living water he offered, about the loving Spirit of God. His disciples relaxed, and even laughed with us. Through it all, something happened inside other people, the way it had in me. Our sin and grief, our anxiety and despair, flew off our shoulders like doves, leaving us weightless. After Jesus left, we talked on about all that he'd said and done. We could talk of little else.

The people said, "We came to see Jesus because of Sabra's witness. But then, we saw and heard for ourselves. Now we know it too, this man is the Savior of the world."

Every morning I walk to the well of Jacob and fill my jug with water for the household. Some days I walk alone. Some days I walk with other women from the village. But every morning I walk thankful for the living water Jesus poured into my life and for the words he gave me to share his Good News.