

Living Water

Rev. Nancy McDonald-Ladd

Please note that Rev. McDonald-Ladd has requested that music and hymns be selected by your congregation.

Working from a little-understood story in the Gospel of John commonly called "the woman at the well," this sermon explores what it might mean for the wisest of teachers to sit and learn from exactly the person they were meant to ignore or discount entirely. In fact, this short text is the longest recorded dialogue the teacher named Jesus has in the entirety of the Christian scriptures. How are we shaped by dialogue rather than monologue? How are the relationships that shape us serve as living water in a dry land?

Background: For reference, and use in worship as congregations may choose: this sermon is based on the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, in the Gospel of John, Verses 4-28. Note that this is a rather intense scriptural passage for some UU contexts. For that reason, you can actually skip this and go to the context-setting reading below (with recording)

Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John—² although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples.³ So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

⁴ Now he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.^[a])

¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

¹¹ "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

¹⁶ He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

¹⁷ "I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸ The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

¹⁹ “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but [your ancestors] claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

²¹ “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship God neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know... ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship God in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the holy one seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and their seeker must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

²⁵ The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When they come, they will explain everything to us.”

Reading:

There is a story I know – about two people who go head-to-head – nose to nose – who dip and parry and sway and meet each other with as much power as any bull who ever blundered through a china shop. It’s a story from the Christian scriptures that sometimes people tell too nicely. Cause it’s a powerful exchange – and maybe a little intimidating – when two people who aren’t editing away the rough edges or the true words come together in conversation. Two people who thirst for deeper truths – or maybe just for a drink of water – and who together resist the temptation to believe that they will surely thirst forever....

In the words of the great poet Denise Levertov –

Don’t say, don’t say there is no water
to solace the dryness at our hearts.

I have seen

the fountain springing out of the rock wall
and you drinking there. And I too
before your eyes

found footholds and climbed
to drink the cool water.

The woman of that place, shading her eyes,
frowned as she watched-but not because
she grudged the water,

only because she was waiting
to see we drank our fill and were
refreshed.

Don't say, don't say there is no water.
The fountain is there among its scalloped
grey and green stones,

it is still there and always there
with its quiet song and strange power
to spring in us,

up and out through the rock.

Sermon: Living Water, Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd

A traveler is far away from home. He is in the midst of a long journey. He is tired. All those people to baptize. More than anybody else, people were saying so. A bigger baptizer even than his cousin John.

Things are happening for Jesus. One might even say a grand plan is underway. But in this moment, he's hungry and thirsty. So while his friends are off in town getting lunch, he sits in the shade of a fountain - and the story says that he just... waits... there.

Just waits, I guess – thirsty as he is. He just waits until a woman comes to the well – minding her own business, it seems – going about the day she's got in front of her. Carrying the water. Chopping the wood. Literally. As those including women whose power is often marginalized do nonetheless - then and now. Carry the water. Chop the wood. Do the work. So she comes along – doing the work.

He waits until she gets there and then – as if it was completely impossible to do a single thing himself, asks this woman if she'll get him a drink.

Not only that, he gives her grief when she asks perfectly reasonable questions in return – like who are you to ask me for a drink. I mean, after all – a Samaritan woman isn't supposed to be cavorting with some strange man in the shade of a well. The patriarchy has its rules, doesn't it – and we all know who pays the price when those rules get broken.

And I can't help but thinking – in this exchange that is literally the longest single dialogue between Jesus and anybody contained anywhere within the entirety of the Christian scriptures – I can't help but think that Jesus in this scenario is – well – kind of a jerk. But there he is, this rather jerky Jesus, who starts up a conversation only to realize that this person he has met in the desert is not going to take a punch without throwing one back. Who are you to ask me that? And why exactly do you know my business? What are you talking about with this living water you say you're gonna give me? You want to ask me questions, she seems to say – I will be asking some back.

And I love it – I love this dialogue so much. I cannot tell you. This socially awkward savior who forgot to bring a cup his conversation partner who is already carrying one bucket of water too many – yet thirsts for something deeper than the well alone can give, some meaning beyond even the scope of the temple and the priests and the patriarchy and the prophets. And so it goes – these two facing off in an exchange that includes tension and exudes a mutually-exerted power and ultimately leaves them both changed at the end. This is literally the only time that Jesus isn't dancing inspirational solos around every character in the Christian scriptures – right here – when a person he was never even supposed to talk to gave as much as she got.

For once the savior doesn't just throw down his truth bombs, drop the mike and scoot off into the next phase of the gospel story. He stays in it. Because there are things to say when both parties come to the conversation willing to actually engage in something real. In this remarkable moment, Jesus not only interrogates this woman about what it is her soul thirsts for – he abides in the moment long enough for her to interrogate him right back. So the wonder of it all – the waiting miracle beneath the densest of theological readings – to me – is simply this – that both came to that well thirsting body and soul – both admitted they were in need of something only the other could provide – and by the sheer discomfort and authentic interchange of a conversation – both came away fundamentally changed.

Would that such creative interchange – with tension and honesty, real questions and a willingness to be transformed – would that such creative interchange were the norm rather than the exception in society and in scripture alike.

Because good God, there are so many monologues in this world, aren't there? Monologues from the pulpit where preachers declare things. Monologues dropped into the void of social media where everybody's got to be persuading an abstract somebody about something. Monologues crafted by PR people to communicate the finely crafted, image-conscious brand-tested messages of the machine. Monologues in scripture that stand in for whatever spiritual, political and social agendas the person holding the pen wanted to get across. So many monologues. So few dialogues –

And I understand why – because of course the stakes of a dialogue are inherently higher than a monologue. The risks inherently greater. As the great theologian James Cone reminds us, “dialogue doesn’t truly happen unless both parties are affected.”

It doesn’t happen unless something changes in you. And if congregational life, the spiritual journey and the life of God are to be anything other than yet one more submission into this world’s tedious anthology of self-righteous monologues – the central requirement is a willingness to be changed by the holy other who parries back and forth alongside you. And they do parry – these two - about who worships at the temple in Jerusalem and who worships somewhere else. There’s back-story to all that – the Samaritans being essentially rogue Israelites who didn’t worship at Solomon’s Temple but instead on the heights of Mt. Gerzim in what is now the northern part of the West Bank.

They had different sacred places. That – along with gender and kyriarchy, etc. etc – was why they weren’t supposed to be talking to each other in the first place. That right there was the crux of an ages-old enmity between the Samaritans and the Israelites. Their temples weren’t on the same piece of real estate.

And yet in this dialogue, what we encounter from these two characters is not just a debate about whose temple is more sacred – but instead an invitation to turn from the hope that the temple will save you altogether – no matter what patch of land it occupies. Turn from the hope that one sacred place or one sacred idea or one pure and sacred thought that you came up with yourself will save you from the death-dealing alienation that leaves you still thirsting for a better and more connected world.

Turn from the hope that the temple will save you – because the living water of actual human interchange does not dwell behind any single edifice.

God knows, in this strange and unforgettable time, we have learned that together. When the temples and the edifices and buildings we love have been closed to us, and we have met each other still – in different, sometimes stranger places. Through these screens and along paths screaming with the music of the natural world. In lawn chairs and on back decks – we left the temple and came to the places where we could still find each other.

At the edge of the town well, outside the cute little downtown coffee shop, in time once again by the cookie table in the Fellowship Hall on Sunday morning. We have made every place where two or more are gathered sacred space - wherever people find each other. And our task is not just to return to our separate temples and close the doors again – but to continue making space for the living water of actual transformative interchange to flow – whenever and wherever it can.

Salvation doesn't come just from doing reverent things in appointed places. It comes from the encounters we have with one another and with the holy – the dialogue that always results in transformation.

Dear blessed creator, dear mother, dear savior
Dear father, dear brother, dear holy other –

Sings Spencer LaJoye in the prayer of our hearts this morning –

Dear holy other -
Dear sibling, dear baby, dear patiently waiting
Dear sad and confused, dear stuck and abused
Dear end-of-your-rope, dear worn out and broke,
Dear go-it-alone, dear running from home
Dear righteously angry, forsaken by family
Dear jaded and quiet, dear tough and defiant
I pray that I'm heard
And I pray that this works
I pray if a prayer has been used as a sword
against you and your heart, against you and your word
I pray that this prayer is a plowshare, of sorts
that it might break you open, it might help you grow –

And in this way – no worthwhile prayer is a monologue, a declaration of what you want or what you believe or what you lament. Instead, it is a dialogue of sorts – lifted up to the holy other in all of their sacred forms – including the sacred people right next to you right now, on the other side of this screen right now, thirsting for want of a single drop right now.

The living water for which we thirst is relationship itself. It's the listening that makes us something new. It's the courage to keep on becoming. That is the purpose of the church – to be a place where we all get to keep on becoming something new – in relationship to our deepest truths, to each other, and to the sacred.

It's a dialogue that never ends and that isn't always fun – in which sometimes we're jerks and sometimes we're confused and sometimes we're tired and often we're tempted to drop the mic and head off into our own stories.

But maybe, maybe – we too have the courage to stay there by the well and keep talking – until our thirst is quenched – and the our journey goes on – altered forever by the holy other who widened their circle for just – one – more.