

“Water Cooler Conversations”

John 4:5-42

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Our attention this morning is drawn to a well in the Holy Land between Judea and Galilee. This was the site of one of Jesus’ most interesting conversations. I suppose you could say it was the equivalent of unscheduled meetings that occur daily around office water coolers. Some of those encounters evolve into deep discussions about important subjects like filling out brackets for the NCAA Basketball Tournament.

Jesus and his disciples had been in Judea, but Jesus felt they needed to go back to the northern region of Galilee because the Pharisees were turning on him as they had John the Baptist. Traditionally, Jews did not take the direct route to Galilee by going through Samaria because there had been bad blood between the Jews and the Samaritans for over seven hundred years. Instead, the Jews crossed the Jordan River to the east before heading north, lengthening the journey from three days to six.

This animosity can be traced back to 721 BCE when the Assyrians occupied Samaria. During that occupation, many of the citizens of Samaria worshipped idols and inter-married, a violation of the Law of Moses most Jews believed. As a result, orthodox Jews broke off all relations with the Samaritans, even refusing to travel through their land.

Matters were made worse about two hundred years later. In 597 and 587 BCE, the Babylonians invaded Judea, destroyed Solomon’s Temple and deported many citizens. When the exiles returned to Jerusalem in 537 BCE, they began rebuilding the Temple.

The Samaritans offered to help rebuild the Temple, but that offer was quickly rejected. The Jews still wanted nothing to do with the Samaritans, whom they regarded as unfaithful to God. As a result, the Samaritans built a house of worship on Mount Gerizim, and they claimed this was the proper place to worship, not Jerusalem. This debate raged until the shrine at Mount Gerizim was destroyed by Jewish troops in 128 B.C.

By Jesus’ time, virtually all communication between Jews and Samaritans had ceased. The wall between them was impenetrable, which was why Jews traveling from Jerusalem to

Galilee would circumvent Samaria. They would double the length of that trip in order to avoid contact with the Samaritans.

When Jesus headed north to Galilee to create space between him and the Pharisees, he refused to follow tradition. Instead of heading east to cross the Jordan River, he turned north and marched straight into Samaria. We pick up the story in the northern region of Samaria at Jacob's well where Jesus and the disciples stopped to rest.

After Jesus sent the disciples into the neighboring town of Sychar to get lunch, a woman arrived around noon at the well for the purpose of filling her pitcher. Jesus asked her for a drink of water, which surprised and confused her. "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" she asked Jesus.

This began a dialogue about everything from water to worship, and the number of times she had been married. Evidently, this unlikely encounter was positive and uplifting because the woman left her water jar and ran to town to tell her neighbors about this remarkable man she met at Jacob's well.

Many of them returned to the well with her and listened to Jesus, too. So impressed were they with Jesus, they asked him to stay in their town, which he and the disciples did for two days.

Why do you think this story found a prominent place in the Fourth Gospel? After all, it is one of the opening stories used to introduce Jesus to his readers, and it is one of the longest recorded conversations Jesus had with anyone.

I believe this story was used to teach the early Christians what was important to Jesus. From the outset of the Fourth Gospel, the writer wanted his readers to have a clear understanding of Jesus' priorities and passions.

Based upon this story, what was important to Jesus? Clearly, two things can be identified from his encounter with the woman at the well. Jesus came to **tear down** the walls of suspicion and hate which separated people, and he came to **build up** the people who had been beaten down by the hardships of life.

One of the most intriguing parts of this story is found in the words which set up this dialogue at Jacob's well, "Now Jesus **had** to go through Samaria." Did Jesus have no choice about which route he would take to Galilee?

Sure he did. Like most every Jew before him had done for over 700 years, Jesus could have gone around Samaria to return to Galilee.

On the other hand, Jesus had to go through Samaria if he was going to be faithful to the God who sent him to teach people how to live together in peace and harmony. God did not send Jesus to the world to reinforce the walls which separated people, but to tear them down by building bridges of goodwill, understanding and reconciliation.

What better way could Jesus demonstrate this than traveling through Samaria, talking to a woman about the mysteries of life and faith and staying two extra days to get to know this woman's neighbors?

I believe what Jesus did that day at Jacob's well and the nearby town of Sychar was as much for his disciples as it was this beleaguered woman and her curious neighbors. The disciples were already in a state of shock over traveling through Samaria, probably for the first time in their lives. Multiply that feeling many times over when they topped a hill on their way back from town with lunch and saw Jesus casually talking to a woman. According to John, they were speechless!

What do you think the disciples learned from this experience? Following Jesus meant they would need to go where others feared to tread, talk to people others shunned, dismantle walls of suspicion and hate, build bridges of reconciliation and good will and share goodness and mercy with everyone along their journey. At all times they were to make hope as visible as Jesus did that day in Sychar.

Maybe this is why they were speechless! This was no small challenge. Nothing about the call to discipleship would be easy in their culture. Everything about this style of ministry, however, would make their world safer and better.

Now it is our turn to learn these lessons. Discipleship demands no less of us. As people of faith whose mission is to reflect the nature of God and make His world better, we must refuse to say or do things which fan the flames of hatred and seize every opportunity to chip away at the walls which keep people apart.

Who are the people in your life that can identify with the woman at the well? How many people do you encounter every day who feel disrespected, ostracized, abandoned, lonely, frightened, misunderstood and vulnerable? What could you do to help them? What difference could you make in their life if you stopped to listen to their story?

Will you ask God for this level of concern, compassion and courage so you can follow Jesus' example? I am confident God will respond to your heartfelt request.

Based upon this story, Jesus was sent not only to break down barriers between people but to build up those who had been beaten down by the hardships of life. It is apparent life

was a struggle for the woman Jesus met at Jacob's well, and it had been for a long time. She was all too familiar with disappointment, depression and grief. We have no way of knowing if her five marriages ended in divorce or her previous husbands died, but whatever the reason for their departure from her life, she made several trips to the cemetery of broken dreams and buried her highest hopes for a better life. Each one left her wounded and weakened.

When she met Jesus, she was hanging on by a thread. Many speculate one reason she was at the well at noon was because she did not feel comfortable being around other people. Most people went to the well early in the morning to beat the noon day heat, but for some reason she did not. Perhaps it was just too painful to answer one more question about her personal life or to have people turn their heads when she walked up to draw water.

When this woman met Jesus that day at Jacob's well, she encountered someone who wanted to give to her rather than take from her. It had probably been a long time since this happened.

Here was a man who treated her respectfully and gave her his undivided attention along with compassion, mercy, grace, hope and healing, and he was a stranger. He took her faith and questions seriously and engaged her in a meaningful conversation. He truly wanted to open her eyes to a new way of thinking, believing and living, which would change her life forever.

It was not as if he was unaware of her past, but he refused to let that limit her future. He was more concerned about lifting her out of the hell she was living than pushing her further down. History may have told this woman she had no hope for a better life, but not the one who offered her "living water."

Who needs you to do for them what Jesus did for the woman at the well? Who needs you to treat them with respect? Who needs your encouragement? Who needs you to help them climb out of the pit of disappointment and despair? Will you reach out to them this week?

Who needs to hear your testimony? This Samaritan woman became the first evangelist in the Fourth Gospel. She had a story to tell and was not bashful or timid. Evidently, she was very persuasive. Her neighbors must have seen enough of a change in her to follow her back to Jacob's well where they, too, had a personal encounter with Jesus.

Who needs you to introduce them to Jesus? Who needs to hear what he has done for you? Will you seize the opportunity this week to tell them? I cannot think of a better gift you could give them. Carry your bucket of "living water" Jesus has given you and share from it freely as you encounter thirsty people along your way.