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Gospel of John 4:1-14

¹Jesus knew the Pharisees had heard that he was baptizing and making more disciples than John ² (though Jesus himself didn't baptize them—his disciples did). ³ So he left Judea and returned to Galilee.

⁴ He had to go through Samaria on the way. ⁵ Eventually he came to the Samaritan village of Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there; and Jesus, tired from the long walk, sat wearily beside the well about noontime. ⁷ Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink." ⁸ He was alone at the time because his disciples had gone into the village to buy some food.

⁹ The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?"

¹⁰ Jesus replied, "If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water."

"But sir, you don't have a rope or a bucket," she said, "and this well is very deep. Where would you get this living water? ¹² And besides, do you think you're greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well? How can you offer better water than he and his sons and his animals enjoyed?"

¹³ Jesus replied, "Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. ¹⁴ But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life."

Empathy at the well.

Our Bible quote today is part of the story of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at a well. In this passage, Jesus asks this woman for a drink of water – despite the fact that she is a dreaded Samaritan. To use today's terminology, the Samaritans

were *marginalized* by Jews of the day. The woman is surprised that Jesus is willing to associate with her. He immediately reveals his true purpose in doing this: he is evangelizing her. The story goes on from here, with Jesus telling her things about her that she thought only she knew, or at least that some outside Jew should not have known. Essentially, this woman has had many lovers whom she has not married. This was a grievous sin at the time. The woman is startled by Jesus' knowledge of her past – seeing it as a miracle - and she then accepts him as the predicted Messiah. Then, in turn, many other Samaritans are converted. Jesus is accepted by people who would normally hate him because he is a Jew.

The Gospel of John contains a number of stories about Jesus that do not appear in any of the other three gospels. The story of the Samaritan woman is one of them. It is John who writes about the miracle where Jesus turns water into wine – his first miracle. John writes about Nicodemus, who, as a member of the rabbinical court called the Sanhedrin, should hate Jesus, but actually defends him. John describes the raising of Lazarus, and the curing of both the disabled man at the pool of Bethesda and the man who was born blind. John is determined to prove that Jesus is the Messiah by describing miraculous and inexplicable events. But while John is big on the supernatural things that Jesus does, he also portrays Jesus as a genuine man. John does this by describing in greater detail than the

other Gospels how Jesus interacted with people in a patient, giving fashion. In the story of the Samaritan woman, while the miracle is subtle – Jesus knowing the past of woman he has never met – the humanity in the story is extremely clear.

So, who were the Samaritans? At one point, the Assyrians – a powerful empire - had conquered the northern portion of Israel, which was called Judah. The Assyrians had then sent pagan colonists into this region. The Assyrians also forced out many of the Israelites who had been living in Judah and scattered them; this was a proto-diaspora that in many ways resembled the diasporas that Jews would subsequently be subjected to in the following centuries. The goal was to remove any possibility of the Israelites ever regaining control of Israel. The Samaritans were a people who then emerged from the intermarriage of the remaining Jews with the pagan colonists. Later, the Samaritans, because they had pagan blood in them, were considered impure by the Jews of Jesus' day. This caused the Samaritans to form their own religious and national identities. As a Jew, Jesus wasn't even supposed to go into the land of the Samaritans. To the Jews, he was visiting a people who had perverted the Jewish faith. But of course, Jesus had no problem associating with marginalized people. The Samaritans used the same Bible as the Jews, but with some changes. In particular, they added Mount Gerizim as a holy site, rejecting the temple in Jerusalem. This is

mentioned later in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well – and it was considered a major sacrilegious act. This one issue was probably the biggest single source of the enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans.

And Jesus' interaction with this Samaritan woman is even more amazing than meets the eye – because there is something subtle, but very important, about the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. It is one of the longest dialogues in the Gospels. In it, the Samaritan woman holds her own in the conversation better than most other people who ever spoke with Jesus. He showed tremendous respect for her, engaging her in an extended dialogue and letting her speak her mind. Jewish men at the time would not have spoken with an unknown woman at all, let alone a Samaritan. Jesus is making a point: this woman is valuable as a potential believer, something that overcame her checkered past, her heritage, and her traditional role in this ancient society.

I've talked before about patients and family members I have visited with at my job as a chaplain at Boulder Community hospital. I'd like to shift now and talk about one man. To protect his privacy, I'll call him Arthur Lobo, who prefers to be called Lobo. He is about my age. He is Hispanic and was born with a condition that caused him to have to use a colostomy bag as a small child – and the condition was permanent. He has used one all his life. He was raised by his

mother and he had no father. They were poor. Then, as a young man, he got into big trouble: he did a robbery and assaulted someone. He then spent 25 years in prison. While in prison he developed colon cancer, from which he recovered.

I first met Lobo several months ago, not long after he had gotten out of prison. He was in the Boulder hospital because he was homeless, and as a result, he was unable to find sanitary places to clean out his colostomy bag. He ended up with a serious infection. I talked to him two other times when he came into the hospital with dangerous infections. Another problem with living in shelters and sleeping on sidewalks is that in both places, he found himself a victim of violence. He had not talked to his mother or brother in twenty years, and he had no other family and no friends. I noticed that Lobo was a very kind and godly man. He always thanked me for my visit and talked about his faith and his trust in God. He wanted most of all to get a place to live so that he could stay out of the shelters and off the street and take care of himself in a clean environment. My job as a chaplain was to listen patiently and to affirm his right to live with dignity. But the biggest part of my job is simply to be empathetic, to show that I can relate to someone's sufferings and that I genuinely feel for that person.

Let's look back at the story of the Samaritan woman. One lesson in this story is that Jesus was willing to engage anyone. He had no comfort zone, no area

of human contact outside of which he was uncomfortable. He sought out this woman the same way he went out of his way to help the disabled, the destitute, and the diseased. Listen to how Jesus is later approached by other Samaritans: *When they came out to see him, they begged him to stay in their village. So he stayed for two days,* ⁴¹ *long enough for many more to hear his message and believe.* ⁴² *Then they said to the woman, "Now we believe, not just because of what you told us, but because we have heard him ourselves. Now we know that he is indeed the Savior of the world."* Jesus stays in their village for two days. He's not supposed to be associating with these people at all.

After not seeing Lobo for a few months, I got another referral to see him. Only this time, he wasn't in one of the medical units. He was in the Behavioral Health Unit, what used to be called the psychiatric ward. The nurses there are incredibly humane and caring people. I walked past the nurses' station and the common area, and checked in Lobo's room for him, but didn't find him. So, I went back through the common area to the nurses' station and asked them where he was. Then one of the nurses pointed to the common area, right in front of me. "He's right there," she said, "watching TV". I had walked past Lobo twice, scanning the area for him with my eyes. I had not seen him. More precisely, I had not *recognized* him. He looked at least ten years older, had lost much of his hair,

and was thin and frail, and I barely could tell it was him. Lobo was shaking slightly, and his face had a strained look. He had decided that he had had enough with living on the streets, being victimized, fighting infections related to his colostomy bag – and had decided that it was time to die. He had stepped into heavy traffic, trying to get run down. But God had protected him. He survived and was being held on a 72-hour psych hold because he was a danger to himself. The nurses reported to me that he was a sweet, cooperative man.

I talked to him for about an hour and a half in the common area, holding his hand. He was beaten down, terribly sad. But he was deeply thankful for me sitting there with him, treating him like a man, caring enough to listen. He told me he wanted to die. Lobo is a Samaritan. He is a rejected member of decent society: a minority, a criminal, a man with a medical condition that make people very uncomfortable, a man with no home and no money. As an older man, I went to a seminary, became a chaplain and a pastor at this church, and I have been fundamentally changed. It has been a blessing to finally learn one of the biggest lessons that Jesus taught us: to have empathy for other people.

I'd like to invite all of you to do the same. Actually, I've gotten to know most of you – and I think that you haven't been as slow as I have been to learn this lesson. I think that this is a truly giving group of people. I sincerely mean it.

There's something else about being empathetic with someone – that person, when they realize that you truly care about how they feel and the situation in which they find themselves, might well open up to you. And this is one of the greatest gifts that any person can give: their trust. This is something I saw with Lobo. The staff at the Behavior Health Unit at Boulder Community Hospital treated him with respect. When I went back two days later and saw Lobo again, he looked relaxed. He was still sad, but this time, instead of telling me that he wanted to kill himself, he said that he would make it, if he could just find a place to live. He would be fine, then, he said. All he needed was a home.

Looking back at our passage, it ends part-way into the story of the Samaritan woman and Jesus. At one point, Jesus is telling her that the water she has to offer him is nothing compared to the water he has to offer her. Jesus says: *“If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water.”* One thing to note is that during the time of Jesus, living water referred to water that is moving, as opposed to stagnant water, something that could be brackish or even dangerous. The world offers us stagnant water; Jesus offers us living water.

A few moments later, Jesus says: *“Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. ¹⁴ But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty*

again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life.”

Jesus is telling us that if we accept the gift he has for us – the gift of faith, as represented by water - we will discover that we have an endless supply of this gift, this fresh, flowing water. We receive the gift just once – but it is within us forever. Living water, flowing water is thus a metaphor for saving faith.

As an aside, there’s one thing I can’t help thinking about when I read the story of the living water. When I was young, we used the word living or live water in a different way. To be honest, it referred, well, to water that a human creates. Once, I once accidentally stopped up the toilet and it overflowed. My brother went running into the family room yelling to our parents that Buzzy had stopped up the toilet and now there was “live” water everywhere!

But let’s get back to the story of the Samaritan. There’s an even more important point when it comes to this metaphor of water and how it impacts the Samaritan woman. Just after Jesus says that he can give the Samaritan woman living water, she asks him: *“...do you think you’re greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well? How can you offer better water than he and his sons and his animals enjoyed?”* The Jacob she is referring to is the son of Isaac, a direct ancestor of Jesus – and one of the great prophets. When Jesus says that the water he has to offer is far more valuable than the water from the well dug by

Jacob himself, he's saying that he is greater than the prophet – and the only person who could be greater than the prophet is the Messiah himself. That's what this passage is about. At the moment he says that his water is infinitely better than the water from Jacob's well, he is announcing to us that he is the Messiah. All we have to do is walk up to the well. Jesus will engage us, treat us with respect, show us empathy for the suffering that we endure from time to time, and then offer us the most valuable gift possible. Then, this gift of faith works forever.

Lobo is a believer. When I sat down with him the second time in the Behavioral Health unit, he said to me very softly: "I know that God is with me. I know that." Lobo remembered this – but only after some humans showed him empathy, showed him his way back to the well. We can do this for the people we meet. People often seem bad to us. They seem to be mean or sinful. But everyone has a past, and while we are all responsible for what we do, our pasts do indeed mold us. Looking at life from the perspective of a troubled person can not only lift them up today – it can literally save that person's eternal soul.