

SERMON: HERE, HAVE A DRINK

MARCH 8, 2026, THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH BLUE HILL

The woman at the well in the story we just heard was a Samaritan. You may recall from the story of “The Good Samaritan” that the Samaritans were hated by other Jews, but you might not know why, so for those of you who don’t, here’s the back story.

For clarity, remember that prior to the birth of Jesus, the years are numbered in retrograde (backwards) so, for example the year 5 BCE occurred before the year 4 BCE. Also, just so you will know, the previous usage of the abbreviations BC, meaning “before Christ” and AD, abbreviation for the Latin “Anno Domini”, “the year of our Lord”, are no longer commonly used. In order to respect our Jewish brethren and those of other faiths who do not consider Christ their Lord, we now use the terms “Common Era”, abbreviated CE for the years subsequent to the birth of Christ. Example, we are now in the year 2026 CE. The years prior to the birth of Christ are referred to as “Before Common Era”, and abbreviated BCE.

In the year 740 BCE, at that time, Israel was divided into two kingdoms, the northern and the southern. Starting in 740 BCE and continuing until 732 or 731 BCE, the Assyrians attacked the Northern Kingdom, its capital city, Samaria, and the surrounding land, also called Samaria, multiple times, ultimately conquering the Jews of that portion of Israel. Many of the Jews were deported to Assyria, and many Assyrians were moved into Samaria to settle the land and to

keep the peace. This is documented in the Old Testament, in the book of 2 Kings as well as in some extra-Biblical, non-religious writings. Over time, the Samaritans intermarried with their Assyrian neighbors. They set up an alternative worship site to parallel the Temple at Jerusalem, but it was later destroyed. Because of the intermarriages and the attempt to create another temple (which they considered sacreligious) the Jews of the South considered the Samaritans to be traitors and heathen, and those who were now mixed race to be filthy and impure.

Unlike other Jewish travelers, even those on foot, who went many miles out of their way to circumvent Samaria, Jesus took the short cut right through that land. That is how He “happened” to encounter the woman at the well. This enmity between Southern Jews and the Samaritan Jews is one of the reasons why the woman was so struck by the fact that Jesus, a Jew from the South, was willing to even speak to her. Another reason, was that it was a taboo for men to speak to women other than their wives and daughters, a taboo that Jesus broke more than once. On top of this, a third reason, was that this woman was of ill repute, known to be living in sin. Probably the reason she had come to the well at noon was to avoid encountering other women. Most women came for water twice a day, early in the morning and late in the evening, to avoid the heat of midday. This woman’s bottom rung social status made it even more of a breach of society’s norms for Jesus to have this conversation with her. One of the things that I love about Jesus is that he was a rebel who valued the law of love above the rules and regs.

The mere fact that Jesus even initiated a conversation with this woman tells us several things:

1. Society's norms are not always God's and it is important for us to differentiate between the two. This is a lesson that many Christian missionaries have had to learn when they went into foreign lands and found indigenous peoples adhering to their own cultural standards. Most mission organizations now realize that it is not critical to force women living in tropical climates to cover every body part from neck to ankle as missionaries in the Victorian Era tried to do. Rather, the priority is to meet needs and to share God's love. Fortunately, most missionary societies today make certain that their missionaries are much better prepared to understand and respect cultural mandates but to differentiate those from issues of true spiritual significance.

Paul told the Corinthians that women should cover their heads, especially when praying. In that culture the only women who didn't routinely cover their heads were prostitutes, so out of respect for God, Paul advised that they not violate that cultural norm. Any of you who are as old as am I, will probably remember when women all wore hats to church. Around the same time that Christian organizations became more aware of the difference between culture and God's imperatives on the mission field, we also, as God's church, became aware that God did not require that we women always wear hats to worship. So look around you, folks...no hats here. It is more important that we show our respect for God in how we live and how we treat others.

My friend Shannon, sitting there with Robert, has a T shirt that says “BE A GOOD HUMAN”. Yeah!

2. Jesus speaking to a woman, a norm he seemed to have no qualms about breaking, as this was not the only time He did it, tells us that Jesus did not discriminate against an entire segment of the population---in this case, women. Paul, writing to the Galatians in 3:28 states “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Whatever barriers our culture might urge us to acknowledge, Jesus breaks down and models behavior that urges us to do the same (I like to think of Jesus as the first women’s liberationist.) It is obviously an imperative for ALL Christians to stand up for equality and to oppose bigotry in any form, either overt or subtle. It requires educating ourselves and each other about our own inherent cultural biases, whether they be gender based, racial, educational economic, political, or other.
3. Jesus spoke to this woman of ill repute, as He spoke to many of ill repute. Jesus hobnobbed with people who were the dregs of acceptable society of the day. Tax collectors in Jesus times worked for the Roman government and were almost uniformly corrupt. They accumulated wealth because they were flagrant extortionists. The Jews considered them heinous traitors; they were thoroughly reviled.

Jesus visited in the home of one tax collector, Zacheus. Even one of his disciples, Matthew was a tax collector, who left his lucrative career to follow Jesus, an impoverished carpenter. Can we too see our way to spending time with and showing love for people who are despised by the majority of our community? Jesus crossed all barriers and we, His followers are called to do the same.

For these reasons, this woman was astonished that Jesus spoke to her, and spoke without any apparent reservation. She was so used to being despised and rejected by her community, that she couldn't imagine that this man, a Jewish man, no less, had asked her for a drink of water. Jesus began to tell her of the "living water" that He could give her and that could quench her thirst forever. So what exactly did He mean by "living water"?

In the book of Jeremiah, in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, we find the same phrase. The prophet refers to "the Lord, the fountain of living water."

In the Gospel of John, 7:37 Jesus says "If you are thirsty, come to me! If you believe in me, come and drink! For the Scriptures declare that rivers of living water will flow out from within." In the next verse, 38, it says "When He said 'living water' He was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in Him." The operative words there are "would be given". Note that these two verses describe something that will happen in the future.

When Jesus was still alive and conducting His ministry here on earth, when one became a follower of Jesus, one engaged with Him as a fellow human being. Even the disciples initially didn't understand that this man whom they greatly admired, was actually the predicted Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus promised that after He was gone, He would send the Holy Spirit to be with those who followed Him. That was the Pentecost event, when the Holy Spirit filled the disciples who were preaching and the people, each of whom heard them preaching in his or her own language.

From Pentecost forward, when you choose to follow Jesus, you get the whole magilla all at once. When you first made that choice, whether it was a slow gradual choice or a sudden, BADA BING, BADA B,OOM the "living water", came to reside in you in real time. That Living Water, the Holy Spirit continues to reside in you whether you are always conscious of it every moment of every day or not.

It is always there to support you, to call on when you are in trouble. It's what fills you with delight when you look out over the Blue Hill Harbor at the sun sparkling on the water and you feel the "peace that passes all understanding". It's what helps you to realize that you are not so alone as you may sometimes think. It's what motivates you to keep on trucking when the turkeys seem to be winning. It's what gives you those "Aha moments" when you suddenly have clarity of understanding about something that was previously cloudy or troubling. It's what helps you to forgive others as you have been forgiven. It's what enables you to feel an overwhelming joy when you

first hold the newest baby in your extended family, or when realize how very much you love somebody who's near and dear to you.

Most importantly, that living water, that Holy Spirit is what enables you to communicate with God. It's what brings you to the realization that God is not a figment of your imagination or a hallucination. The Holy Spirit is the vehicle through which you are able to speak to God and to hear God speaking to you. And God is still speaking

So here, have a drink of that living water...guzzle a big deep thirst quenching drink. If you are a Christian, it flows from within you, and you need never be thirsty...EVER!

AMEN