

Sermon: **WOUNDED AND GIFTED**

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John 4.5-42:

Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?"

Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

When I first became familiar with this story in second or third grade, the way it was told to me, I picked up that this woman was a woman of loose morals who was sleeping around and had all these marriages, and couldn't keep that under control, but Jesus saw through that; and because she saw that he knew everything, that he was omniscient, she believed he was the messiah—and that was the point of the story.

Since I was a little kid I've learned some things that help me see the story in a new way. One thing was that in Jesus' culture it was men alone who could initiate marriage and divorce. Women could not; they didn't have that power. So if this woman was married five times it was either because she had five husbands die, and she was pretty deeply grieved, or she had five men who used her and threw her away: she'd been used. And if she's with a man who isn't her husband it can only be because he's willing to use her but not willing to take responsibility for her. This is a woman in a lot of pain. None of that would have been anything that she could have chosen. She was not a floozie, she was a victim.

Knowing that changes not only how I see that story, it changes how I see people: understanding her story helps me see what I have been told is reason to condemn her is actually a reason to have compassion.

In 2008 a movie came out call "Slumdog Millionaire." Remember that? This kid who lives on the streets in a slum in India finds himself on one of these TV game shows. It turns out he can correctly answer every single question, even arcane questions like "Who's face is on the hundred dollar bill?" You wouldn't think this kid would know such things, so everyone think he's cheating. He must be a part of some scheme. But we get to see his story, and we come to understand how he came to know the answers to each of those questions. Every single one of them is heartbreaking. Along the way we discover that he is a person of deep integrity and honesty and compassion. We come to see that what some people think is reason to condemn is actually as a reason to have compassion for him.

The way the gospel story was improperly interpreted for me became a lesson in not judging. Jesus does not judge this woman. He understands her hurt and the brokenness and he accepts it. He makes no judgment. He simply, gently, allows the conversation to go on.

In first century culture, as is still true today in many parts of the world, it's primarily women who draw household water. Women in Africa walk on average four miles every day, with all their family's water for washing and cooking and cleaning. What I didn't know behind this gospel story is that in that the women would draw water at the well in order of their social standing. After all, you really want to be there first thing in the morning, because it's cool and it's not such a hot sweaty job, and the water's cool and clear before everybody muddies it up dropping their buckets in the well, and you want your water before breakfast.

But this woman comes to the well at noon. There's no reason to wait that long unless she's at the end of the line. There's probably nobody in that village that's more despised than she is. Nobody wants to be seen with her. She has been so shamed by her history that she's not only been a victim of all those men that have used her, she's also a victim of her entire village who has shamed her and ostracized her.

She's a Jew and Jews have nothing to do with Samaritans, and Jesus is a Rabbi and Rabbis don't exchange with women—especially not with someone as socially unacceptable as she is. So when she meets this stranger at the well she has absolutely no reason to respect any exchange whatsoever, let alone a conversation. And yet Jesus not only engages her in a conversation, he engages her in a *long* conversation. It is the longest conversation in the Bible.

Jesus treats her like a peer. They have a theological discussion; it's not just about the water in the well or the weather. In fact he treats her like a Rabbi, doing what Rabbis would do: rabbis would talk theology. They would bounce their different opinions back and forth and they would argue and deliberate. That's what Jesus does with this woman: they talk about the living waters, they talk about eternal life, they talk about her life, they talk about worship, they talk about the coming of the Messiah. He treats her like a Rabbi and they have this long theological discussion.

And then John gives us this interesting detail. After this discussion the woman leaves her water jar and she goes to the city. Now John wouldn't include that detail of the water jar if it didn't mean something. I've heard people say "Well she was forgetful." John wouldn't bother with that. It's got to mean more than that. I think there might be a couple of things going on. One is that she came to the well thirsty and now she has drunk of that living water that Jesus talks about. After this exchange, after having been treated the way she was she's satisfied; she's full, she's not thirsty anymore. She can leave the water jug.

I think maybe she also leaves it there because she knows she's coming back. She going to go tell people about Jesus and bring them out to meet him.

This woman becomes the first Christian evangelist. She brings people to Jesus. In one afternoon that woman brought more people to Jesus than I've probably brought to Jesus in thirty seven years of preaching. She pulled it off. And then there's this other interesting detail at the end when the disciples come back and they say "Jesus we brought you some lunch," and you can just see the paper bag with the fast food logo on it and Jesus says "No I'm good." And they're thinking: "What? Did somebody bring him lunch that we didn't see?" And he says "I have food to eat that you don't know about."

Isn't it interesting that at the beginning of the story the thirsty woman comes to the well and at the end leaves her water jug because she's full, and Jesus starts out the story weary and thirsty and asks her for a drink and by the end of the story *he* is satisfied, he has been filled. He's been nourished. *She fed him.*

Now how did that happen? How did this woman who has been shamed and broken and used and lonely and isolated turn into somebody who could meet Jesus and talk face to face and feed him with an engaging discussion, and even turn into a powerful evangelist?

Another thing I didn't know back in third grade is that in that culture and still maybe in some rural places in the Middle East, to share water with somebody means you're friends. To share a meal means you are friends for life.

So when Jesus asks this woman, "Please give me a drink," he's asking her to be his friend. He doesn't just treat her with respect; he doesn't even just treat her like a peer who could be a rabbi: he treats her like a friend, someone he needs and wants. He sees her the way he sees his friends.

We tend to make judgments about people that we don't know very well and we pretty easily divide them into people that we like and people that we don't like, people that we approve of and we don't approve of—usually based on surface judgments. But our friends we see honestly; we see all of who they are. We can see all the ways in which they're messed up and we can accept that, and we can also see ways in which they're wonderful and we love them. We can see both of those at the same time.

Jesus had this wonderful ability to be able to see people's woundedness and their giftedness at the same time. We tend to let our wounds outweigh our gifts. When we think about ourselves we're so aware of all the things that are wrong with us, of our own inadequacies, the things that get in the way of us being able to give our gifts. All those ways in which we're not good enough, those negative things, inhibit our ability to give our gifts.

A lot of times with other people we ignore their giftedness, their precious qualities because there's something that we don't like and that's all we notice, that's all we think of. But Jesus is able to see people's woundedness and still to believe in their giftedness. He knows there is this well of the water of God that wells up in each person, that God flows from each of us. Sure, there are stones that have fallen into the well that block the flow of the water and make it so you can't get your bucket in. But Jesus knows that that spring is there and he believes in it. And his seeing that spring, despite our brokenness, allows us to let God begin to move some of those stones so that the water can flow. We're still wounded people but the Spirit's spring flows freely.

Imagine something with me. Close your eyes if it helps. Imagine that you're in your house. It's the middle of the day and you've gone to the kitchen for a drink of water and you're standing there at the kitchen sink with a glass of water looking out the window and Jesus comes and stands next to you. And maybe your first thought is "Why me?" There are millions of houses that Jesus could come to... but here he is... and he seems to believe that he's in the right place,

talking with the right person. And he looks at you, looks deep into your eyes and he smiles and says "Please give me a drink."

And you know he probably doesn't mean just a glass of water. He sees something in you, some living spring of some kind of grace and blessing that he is thirsty for. And he sees all your wounds, all the things you're ashamed of, the things you regret. All the losses and sorrows, all the ways you feel unworthy and inadequate. He sees it.

But still he believes in that flowing spring as if he is Moses standing before the rock at Horeb, knowing that there's water in that rock, even though nobody can see it. He seems to thirst for whatever it is that flows most deeply from your soul, straight from God. He seems to drink of that though you may not know what it is. That flow itself begins to move some of the stones of your wounds... and it flows even more freely... and Jesus says, "Thank you."