

Woman at the Well

March 12, 2023

In February Victoria and I had the wonderful opportunity and great privilege of being able to visit the Bahamas and in particular the city of Freeport. Last year, friends from Toronto purchased a condo on one of the canals that are part of the inland waterway around the Freeport area. They invited us to visit them and were outstanding hosts for our time together. It was enjoyable in so many ways including the morning when I visited a local barbershop for a haircut. (I imagine that some of you are looking at me and thinking ‘haircut, why would you waste the time and money – however, I was shaggy and needed a trim). The visit to the barbershop was intriguing in many ways beginning with the sign on the door which advertised haircuts, shaves, marriage licences, a commissioner of oaths and consultation with the resident clergy. My friend had discovered that the Rev. Gary Cooper operated the shop and he, along with three other Bohemian men, offered haircuts. Rev. Cooper was a barber, a commissioner of oaths and a pastor. At the conclusion of my haircut Victoria declared it was the best haircut I had ever had, and I left inspired by the camaraderie of that place.

I thought of my barbershop experience after reading this morning’s gospel lesson. Like me, Jesus finds himself in new territory and is in need of something even more basic than a hair cut – a cup of water. With that request begins one of the foundational stories of John’s gospel in which Jesus and a Samaritan women break all the social norms as they engage one another in an ever-deepening conversation about water and life. The story begins at Jacob’s Well in a place known as ‘Schechem’ – a village inhabited by Samaritans. As you know, the term ‘Samaritan’ refers to an outcast group of mixed breed Jewish people who had long been despised by pureblood Hebrews. According to history the Samaritans were Jews who interbred with foreigners after the fall of Samaria to the Syrians in 722 BCE. The Samaritans’ lack of racial purity resulted in their separation from mainstream Judaism, and they established their own worship centre on Mount Gerizim far from the temple in Jerusalem.

Our gospel reading suggests that Jesus is taking a shortcut across Samaritan territory as he travels toward Jerusalem. At this point he has separated from his disciples and finds himself thirsty and alone at Jacob’s Well without even a cup to draw water for himself. Of course, he wasn’t entirely alone for he encounters a woman at the well and he asks her to draw a cup of water for him. It is at this point in the story that any upright, purebred, Jewish citizen is going to be offended. If this man is a rabbi how dare he interact with an inferior Samaritan; and further, how dare he interact with a lone woman thought, in so many ways, to be untouchable. What a scandal! Even the women herself is affronted by Jesus’ request: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” she inquires.

Jesus ups the ante of the conversation stating, “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.” Perhaps she thinks Jesus is ignorant of his locale and the local customs for she counters, “are you greater than our ancestor Jacob who gave us this well? And, besides (she scoffs) the well is deep and you have no bucket.”

At this point their discussion risks breaking into a religious quarrel, one of those things which folk wisdom tells us, like politics, should never be discussed. Yet, Jesus

perseveres: “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give will never be thirsty.”

Perhaps out of exasperation; perhaps out of desperation; the woman demands, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water again.” It is at this point in the story that I had to stop. There seemed to be a shift in what is being discussed. Both Jesus and the woman are in need of thirst-quenching water. Both have stopped at the well. But suddenly the story seems no longer focused upon H₂O, but upon a thing called ‘living water’. What is living water? Have you tasted living water? Is it possible that living water satisfies more than a parched throat? Is it possible that living water satiates a parched life?

At this point the storyteller reveals that this woman has had five husbands and is now living with a man who is not her husband. Unlike other women who come to the well in the cool of morning, she comes at noon in the heat of the day perhaps to avoid contact with others, perhaps because she has been harassed or shunned. There was an era of Biblical interpretation when male scholars concluded that this woman had been a “loose” woman – so many men, unstable relationships, concluding in a common law union at best. Contemporary Biblical scholars, including keen minded feminists, see this woman’s plight differently.

In a time and culture when having a husband meant personal and financial security, one might imagine this woman endured much bad luck. One scholar mused that perhaps her first husband succumbed to a famine, a second was trampled by an animal, another was conscripted to Caesar’s army, the last was a brute who demanded service without fidelity and finally, according to custom, the brother of one of these men takes her in - as was his duty – but, of course, he is not her husband. Worn by life, rejected by community, she comes to the well at mid-day apart from the others. One scholar recognizes that this Samaritan woman is beset by so many encumbrances to a full life – racial prejudice, gendered restraints, moral slander. It is likely she simply ‘exists’ expecting not much more out of life than a cup of water.

Yet, this woman’s encounter with the *man* at the well is like an encounter with God – it is characterized by conversation, by a free exchange of ideas, by mutual respect. In this conversation she is once again viewed as human, as worthy of regard and even the promise of a full life. “Go and tell the people of your town what you have experienced,” Jesus says to her. “You be the bearer of Good News; you be the one to point them to the great ‘I Am’ of life. Claim your place, acknowledge your dignity, rejoin community, drink of the living water.” And she does. She does. She moves beyond existing to living, transformed by a genuine, respectful, reciprocal relationship with this stranger who is like God to her.

Where have you experienced such living waters? Who or what quenches your thirst for life? In what well spring is God revealed to you? What transforms you from merely ‘existing’ to ‘truly living’? It was just such living waters that I discovered in that little barbershop in Freeport. Ravaged in 2019 by Hurricane Dorian, Freeport residents have experienced many challenges – ruined buildings, uprooted businesses, natural destruction and the devastation of tourism, their number one industry. In addition, Freeport’s history as a trading post for the slave trade still lingers in the psyche. Its minimum wage of just over \$5 per hour threatens to impoverish those who rely on it to purchase eggs at \$18/dozen. There is no minimum salary for preachers who double as

barbers in order to feed their family. Yet, in that barbershop living water flowed. Seats were placed along one wall – not just for those awaiting a hair cut, but for all comers who wanted to sit for a while, to speak the slow cadence of Bohemian English, to laugh uproariously in the presence of other men and to feel alive. This is what I witnessed and felt in that barbershop - a community where people mattered and dignity was granted and, thanks to the Rev. Cooper, serious topics were discussed such as respect, fidelity and honour. When I left that shop, I had been given the time and attention of men (with much more hair than me), because that shop was not so much about cutting hair as it was an oasis for living-water.

Living water bubbles up in real human relationships. The woman at the well finds her life transformed as she is engaged by Jesus, admired for her questions, and respected as an equal in the conversation. The living water of genuine human relationship begins to wash over her and the struggles of her life are no longer the only thing that defines her.

I have a friend named Dayle Armstrong. I imagine that some of you know her. She allowed me to tell you a little of her story. Dayle and her husband Bob have made a difficult decision. They have decided to leave their family home of 45 years and move to McClure Place. Those who live in McClure place know that the living water of human relationship can be found there, but I imagine that the residents also know the internal struggle that comes with leaving a home filled with so many memories.

Dayle has been the heart and soul of the refugee committee at St. Martin's Church. Over the years she has welcomed, befriended and guided countless refugees from Afghanistan and Iraq to a new life in Canada. She has been living water to these newcomers and they have taken to calling her Mom. After hearing of Dayle's decision to move, one of the newest arrivals showed up on her doorstep with tears streaming down her face. Using the best of her new language she said to Dayle: "Mom, you no move. I come each morning and clean. I come each afternoon and cook. You no leave your house." Here was a woman who knew the deep trauma of leaving her home and all the challenges that came with it. She believed that her new friend should not experience such upheaval and so she came to pour living-water over Dayle and her consolation and offer of help revealed the God who exists in the midst of human relationships.

Where do you experience living water? A grandchild on the knee? A friend who truly listens? A gathering of men for breakfast? Inhaling breath in a northern forest? A moment of deep stillness in this sanctuary? Jesus explains to the woman that God is not found only on Mount Gerizim or only in Jerusalem, rather God is the Spirit that blows through every moment of human connection where compassion, camaraderie and love are found. In a world of many distractions, it is easy to thirst for living water. May we be inspired by the exchange at this ancient well to stop, to risk vulnerability, to truly listen to one another and to discover in the best of human connection a life-giving water that feeds the soul. God is calling to us from the midst of human community and offering us living water. May we drink deeply. Amen.

Rev. Brian Walton