

## **The Woman at the Well, But Not Well**

**John 4:4-10**

**February 1, 2009**

There was a lot more to that encounter between Jesus and that woman than a casual reading of it might indicate. For example, it says that the woman was there at the well to get water at noon. During the torrid heat of noon was NOT when people typically did that. Normally, townswomen would have made the trip to the well hours before, at daybreak, chatting and socializing on the way out there and back. Only someone trying to avoid the other women of the town would have gone in the heat of the day, when chances were good that she'd be the only one there. It was the strategy of a social outcast. And in her time, a social outcast is the way she'd have been seen, after five marriages, and now living with a man, unmarried. That marital history and present living arrangement would have been considered most disreputable, shameful, and disgraceful. Also, this was Samaria and she was a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans were sworn enemies and adversaries. Finally, was the simple fact that she was a woman. In that day, a man of any respectability at all would NEVER have spoken in public to a woman to whom he was not married – particularly to one with a reputation like hers. (Men really weren't even supposed to speak to their own wives in public situations.)

So, for any of several reasons, this lady didn't want this conversation. If this stranger was "coming on to her," that would only mean trouble for her – doubly so since he was Jewish and she was a Samaritan. But she knew from experience that, were she stupid enough to continue talking with this stranger, she would likely end up being hurt or made to feel cheap and dirty. To her, the fewer people with whom she had contact, the fewer there would be to act disgusted, appalled, or irritated at her. That's why she was doubtful, suspicious, defensive, and nervous. She only wanted to be left alone, allowed to get through another day without problems, without one more humiliating rejection or show of disapproval or abuse.

Her grim resignation and coping with her limited life reminded me of an experiment done by a certain gardener. He said that, part way into the growing season, out of curiosity, he took an empty one-gallon jug and inserted the end of one of the pumpkin vines he was raising into the mouth of it. He left it that way and forgot about it. When, a couple of months later, he happened to look at it, a pumpkin (of sorts) now filled the jug. It was, however, a very sad, distorted pumpkin. Despite having all the sunshine it needed and drawing the same nourishment from the soil as its sister pumpkins life in the jug had been very constricting for the pumpkin. It was smaller than the others, was discolored for some reason, and it was obvious that there would be no further change or growth for it.

I get some of that "pumpkin-in-a-jug" picture regarding this woman in the story and not only her. A similar constriction of people's spirits is quite common. Often people do it to themselves. Other times (like this gardener, creating this contortion in the life of the pumpkin), it is, at least partly, inflicted

upon them. Either way, the results are about the same. Instead of unfolding and emerging as all that the person could have been, now his hope, his joy, his confidence, his ability to trust, and his “at-homeness” in his world are arrested and misshapen. Something like the pumpkin, he becomes resigned to existing in some confining role, some safe niche, or some obscure, dim corner of life.

I’ve screwed up too many times. The only way to avoid another humiliation, further criticism, or still more regret is to stay out of sight and make no waves.

I’ve faced up to the fact that I’m not an interesting person, that I’m intellectually mediocre, bland, and tediously predictable. The fewer people I bore to death, the better.

With all of my terrible insecurities, hang-ups, and phobias, I have to keep my life safe and under very tight control. Otherwise, I’ll behave badly and make matters still worse.

Or, “Now that I no longer have a husband,” or “Because I’m so overweight,” or “Having aged as much as I have lately,” or “Having so little money,” or “Because of this hearing problem,” ...I need to pull way in, to limit my exposure, and to accept that this is all that remains of my life.”

As with that marginalized Samaritan woman, it becomes a way of life – actually of “non-life.” The person is shaped and limited, for example, by fear of other people’s criticism and judgment. Or maybe she sees herself as a walking billboard, proclaiming some sin or failure in her past. Yet another, because of this-or-that weakness, disability, or deficit, sees himself as “being-in-the-way” and needing to apologize for existing. Maybe it is someone whose only dream he ever had for his life has evaporated, so he now lives as a spiritual and emotional hermit, with little sense of worth or reason for being. Whatever causes it, it’s a hellish state in which to arrive, and it happens to millions of us.

In moments of thinking clearly, the person even knows that his exile is self-imposed. The Samaritan woman probably had moments of saying to herself, “I shouldn’t have to tiptoe, worry, cringe, and doubt myself like this. Why am I doing it?” But being able to say that, and even discuss it, doesn’t keep it from stubbornly plaguing the person, does it? That’s because (to go back to that pumpkin in a jug), for all of the constriction, limitation and distortion, after Awhile, there’s a certain security, protection, and (in the worst sense of the word) “peace of mind” to being confined and contained in that jug.

Slinking to the well alone to get water at the hottest part of the day was unpleasant, but it was safe and predictable. Lonely as it was, it was a way of getting by for yet another day. By not talking to, or even seeing anyone, her dormant hunger for friendships and closenesses wouldn’t be reawakened. With the absence of human contact, nothing would challenge what she had decided was true of all of the townspeople: that they were all snobs, were judgmental, and were cruel and merciless. Thus, her grim worldview, her sullen paranoia,

her free-floating resentments, and her chronic petulance could stay unchallenged and intact. So, in a distorted way, it “worked” for her. It even gave her a form of control.

That’s what’s behind it for those who have, in effect, put a straitjacket on their own spirits; those who have pulled the walls of their lives in close around them; those who now limit themselves to only the most narrow kinds of experiences; and those who have reached a final conclusion about who they are and what they are worth.

So this woman says to Jesus (liberally translated), “Hey, fella, whatever you have in mind, I’m not interested. Buzz off and let me be.”

But Jesus won’t! There had to have been more conversation than what appears in the scripture, but there was no one else there to record it. This much is clear, though. Jesus does not get sucked in – as is all too easy to do – by any of her peevish or antagonistic comments or put-downs. He patiently keeps working his way through barrier after barrier, allowing time for that sullen facade of hers to give way. Finally, she realizes that Jesus is unfazed by any of the stuff about her that has so bedeviled her: not her religious history, not her marital record, not the fact that she has recently been shacking up with some guy, and not the fact that everyone in town sees her as a bitter and anti-social wretch. As her conversation with him moves she begins to feel set free and forgiven – so much so that she runs back into town to tell all of those people (who as recently as this morning she wouldn’t have dared speak to) that they owe it to themselves to come and meet this man who has made everything different for her.

They probably called it a miracle and, in one sense, it is. Insofar as a miracle is something no one expected to ever happen, it was definitely miraculous. But miracle in the sense of magical? No, unless we’re talking about the “enchantment” of a noon-hour conversation that brings her to believe that, whatever were her old sins, her dirty little secrets, the weaknesses in her character, or her bad habits, instead of adding up to a prison in which she was sentenced to live, they were no more than a load of baggage for which she had full permission to drop, anytime she wished.

Her story does raise some important questions. They’re ones like, “What might I actually come right out and say, if I really thought that I had any business at all speaking out?” or “What might I do if I didn’t think I had long since blown all my credibility?” or “What, once-upon-a-time, before I discredited myself, did I have to offer that was needed or important?” or “What difference, if I could ever actually be forgiven, would I be making by now in life and in lives?” Or, in the case of the Samaritan woman, “What could happen if I were to take the risk of holding up my head and making myself a part of that group, walking to the well at 7:00 a.m. instead of noon?”

What it comes down to is this: that it takes far more courage than one would think to turn one's back on the miserable, but familiar, security of settling for thinking of oneself as "washed up," or unwanted, or terminally mediocre, or obsolete, or discredited. The embarrassing-to-face part of this is, that NOT to break out of that is one's own choice, not a necessity. Even when it originally was something external that limited, confined, or squelched one's spirit, to settle in and stay there is a choice. For at every point, right to your or my last' breath, God continues to have extraordinarily high hopes for us and the unique gifts that each of us has to give.

A poem by the Rev. James Forbes, senior minister at Riverside Church in New York City, describes for me what Jesus seems to have awakened and restored that noon in the soul of that Samaritan woman. Using music as a symbol for your and my own particular spirits, it says:

There's a song inside of me/ And I can hardly wait to see/ What it is I have to say/ Or the music I will play./ It has been so long in coming; First the thought and then the humming. / But before I find my key/ Something stifles it in me./ What keeps my song from being sung? /Past hurts, deep fears, a timid tongue?/ What threat stand guard before my face?/ What tyrant, what demons besieging my space? /Now it's tired of being repressed. It demands to be expressed. /What a shame to keep a song/ Cramped in silence, oh so long. / "Release your song, said the spirit to me. You'll never be you 'till your song is free./While you debate –decide to get ready to sing/ Your song could die like a stillborn thing." Struck by the peril of further delay/My song like a flood came forcing its way./ Up from within and down from above, /A kingdom built on the power of love. /Thank God, my song has been set free./The rhythm and the word are right for me. /I'm finally ready to sing out strong./ My soul is saying, "This is MY song!"

Just so! Hauling water at noon, alone, is stupid and unnecessary. No matter who we are and what we've done, or have failed at, or have lost our way in, for God's part, there is absolutely nothing that requires us to repress our song of life, withhold our gift to life, or bury our particular wisdom or grace. Doing so is not humility or repentance. It is petulance. If you've drifted into doing that, then today – this week at the latest – give it up!