

March 12, 2023
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-26

Don't Hold Your Breath

So there is Jesus, sitting beside a well. It is noon. The sun is high in the sky. Jesus is hot and thirsty. He has been traveling all morning. Here comes a woman with a jar to draw water. She is a Samaritan woman.

That's because Jesus is in Samaria. And here's the problem. Jews aren't supposed to interact with Samaritans. Men aren't supposed to be alone with women. But Jesus is tired and he's thirsty. So what will he do?

What will happen next?

The people listening to this story long ago would have been holding their breath. They would have been on pins and needles. Jesus, the Son of God, the Savior and Messiah, at a well with a Samaritan woman. It would have made their heartrate go up. For us, the scandal of it may be hard to see. But for the audience in Jesus' time, the tension and innuendo are obvious. The well is a notorious place for romance. It's where eligible men and women wink and nudge. And here is Jesus, a good man, a righteous rabbi filled with the Spirit of God, in an intimate moment with a questionable, possible seductive Samaritan woman.

And here they are. Together. At the well. Together. So what will Jesus do? What will he say? Will he shout at her? Will he ignore her? Will he try to cut the tension with a joke? Will he be patronizing call her little missy or sweetheart? Will he project his own discomfort onto her and react with hostility? The audience holds its breath, waiting to see what Jesus will do.

He's a man; she's a woman. He's a Jew. She's a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans despised each other; though both worshiped the same God and used the same scripture. Samaritans and Jews were not the same. They were different. Their laws were different. Their temples were different. Their cultures were different. But they both thought of themselves as God's people who had this God thing right. Each group thought of themselves as the REAL Jews. And it's always the ones like us, that aren't us, that bother us the most. The ones that are very similar but different that we despise. And Jews despised Samaritans. And Samaritans despised Jews. They wouldn't live near each other or work with each other, or eat with each other, or share tools or tableware with each other. For generations, the air between them was full of hostility.

Hostility like that is still around today. There are people who despise others who are from ‘there’ or who are like ‘that’. People identify as much with their hatred of another group as much as anything else. The Scots despise the English. The English despise the French. The French despise the Greeks. Kentucky despises Tennessee. It’s tradition. It’s just part of who we are. As much as it’s about who we are, more often about who we are not.

But back to Jesus and the woman at the well. Remember, it’s noon; and Jesus is hot and tired. And she is coming to get water from the well. And she has the upper hand here because we are in Samaria. And this is her town and her turf and her well. And Jesus is the one who is thirsty. He will have to ask for a Samaritan drink from a Samaritan jar.

I imagine the Samaritan woman tensing up when she sees Jesus. She steels herself for what may be an attack. Maybe he will taunt her or mock her like so many Jews have. If she offered him water, he would react with disgust. Saying he can’t drink Samaritan garbage. He would sneer and call her a dog. They always made comments like that. Shouted across a road or made in passing just loud enough for her to hear. They

always felt they had a right—No—a duty to insult her; especially when they were with other Jews. If she replied, if she defended herself, they would double down. How dare she speak to them? How dare she address them at all? How dare she think she had a right to stand up for herself? There are people treated like that today. Who are insulted and rejected, and people feel they have every right to do it. One of the librarians at the Midway Library told me about a recent program called Black Resistance. Several high school students were the speakers. They are black and they talked about the names they are called every day. The insults, the slurs, the whispers. The looks, the sneers, the subtle distancing. It takes a toll, they said, mentally and emotionally. You feel different. You feel unwanted. That people treat you as other, something not like them. And you learn to prepare yourself for it. You learn to make yourself tough. You learn to close yourself off and put up the walls against what the world is always telling you: You are not welcome. You are not OK. You are not one of us.

I imagine the Samaritan woman think something like this. Remembering the words she always hears, the rejection she always feels. She is

suspicious of everyone and everything. She approaches the well and Jesus speaks right away, asking for a drink. The woman is shocked. She sputters, ‘how is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ She knows that Jews and Samaritans don’t share water jars. They don’t share anything. The narrator gives us an aside make sure we understand the situation. Parenthetical note: Jews and Samaritans don’t share things in common. The word in Greek is *sunKRAomai*. It means to use something with someone, to do something cooperatively. And hold something in common, but there is nothing in common with Jews and Samaritans. So why is Jesus asking? Wouldn’t he rather die of thirst than share?

The Samaritan woman has been told she is garbage repeatedly by people like Jesus. That she is gross. That she is not worth anything. She is so suspicious of this. Why are you asking me for a drink? And Jesus says, “if you knew who I was, you would ask me for a drink.” Now she knows this is a cruel joke. There must be other Jews waiting in the bushes to laugh at her. A Jewish man offering a Samaritan woman water? Hah! Yeah, right! That’s ridiculous. Ok, she’ll play along. Where’s your

bucket to draw water with? And now he's talking about eternal life springing up within and quenching the thirst we all feel. This is conversation is different than what she is used to. No sneers. No insults. No demeaning words. She wants to believe what he is saying about life, free and flowing. With no more emptiness and despair. Life that is full and lasts forever. This isn't just small talk they are having. It's a theological conversation. "Give me this water, then" the Samaritan woman says. "So I don't have to keep coming back to this well." She holds her breath waiting for the no. Waiting for the revulsion, the slur, the derogatory remark that she is a Samaritan woman, and eternal things can't be shared with her.

"Go, get your husband and come back," Jesus says. "I have no husband," she replies. Here is comes. Here is comes now; the judgment and condemnation. "You are right in saying have no husband," Jesus replies. "You have had five husbands. And the one you are with now isn't your husband either." And there's the truth. The truth of this woman's life laid out there. The truth of just how deep the rejection runs for her. Just how much she has been denied a safe, secure home. Just

how many times she has had promises broken and vows denied. How many times abundant life has not been hers. How often God's compassion and grace have not been hers. She has always been that Samaritan woman. That woman who can't keep a husband. And this Jewish man is now going to tell her what she already knows; that she is not God's type. She holds her breath, waiting, waiting for the words. But... they don't come.

He knows the truth. "I see you are a prophet," the woman says, changing the subject back to religion. So what about us Samaritans? What about our worship? Do we share the same God or not? And Jesus tells her the truth. He tells her that the truth matters most. "That's what God looks for. That's what God seeks. People who want Spirit and truth. It doesn't matter if you are Jew or Samaritan. Man or woman. Right or left.

Straight or not straight. If we worship and serve in Spirit and truth, then we share Spirit and truth. We can't be divided up. No one can be foreign or different or other or outside of God." The Samaritan woman is beginning to listen. She sees an opening, a crack, a reason to hope. She confesses to Jesus: "I know that the Messiah is coming, even for us."

Jesus confesses to her, “I am that one. The Messiah who has the Spirit and the truth for you.”

And suddenly, the Samaritan woman can exhale. She can release the breath she has been holding for so long. Along with all the garbage and the pain and the disappointment she has had to bear. The hurt of refusal and rejection. The tension of anxiety and suspicion and fear that she has always held, always waiting for the other shoe to drop, always waiting for disappointment. She can let it go and release what she has had to hold it together and keep together herself. Jesus has shared in the Spirit with her. He has given her room to take a deep breath. Before, no one saw her as anything more than a Samaritan woman. But Jesus saw her as someone capable of having Spirit and truth. Worthy of having it. Of sharing it. Of holding it in common. It is the living water her soul needed. An act of love like no other. The Spirit of God is hers. And she rushes out to share it with others. Jew and Samaritan, male and female. There is nothing to stop the Spirit from being shared with anyone. That Spirit and its truth set us free. But like the Samaritan woman, we might be guarded. We might be suspicious. We might be holding on and

holding in everything because we have been so wounded and hurt. But Jesus shares grace and abundant life with you today. Not just a little. But a spring gushing forth. You can breathe easy. You can let go. As a breathing meditation, I'd like you to close your eyes and place your hands on your knees or wherever they are comfortable. Take in a breath and breathe it out slowly. Let your next breath fill you to your toes to the top of your head. Then let it out from the top of your head to your toes. As you breath in and out, repeat the phrase, I am filled with God's Spirit and truth. As you breath, notice if you feel the breath catching anywhere. Notice any resistance where you might be holding tension. Send the breath there. I am filled with God's Spirit and truth. Maybe experiences of rejection or pain come to the surface. Breath through them. Don't push them down or hide them away. Breath love into them. Breath in God's mercy. Breath out God's grace. All the way in. All the way out. You don't have to hold your breath anymore. You don't need to pretend to be anything other than yourself. God has shared everything with you in Jesus. God's love has been poured into you. You are worthy of the Spirit and worthy of the truth that give us life.