

GIVE ME THIS WATER

She journeyed to *Jacob's Well* at high noon to get her daily supply of water for cooking, cleaning and drinking. It was an unusual time to be doing such a laborious task, with the sun beating down relentlessly and the heat of the day at its peak. Most women (and make no mistake, drawing water was considered women's work) tended to get their water either first thing in the morning or late in the afternoon to avoid the scorching temperatures and make what was already an arduous job a little more tolerable.

But there were at least two other reasons why this woman chose to go to *Jacob's Well* at a time of the day others tended to avoid. First, she was a Samaritan. What was the big deal about that?

Well, think of the last person you would want to see while you were doing your daily work: someone you thoroughly despised, a person you would do almost anything you could to avoid; then multiply your contempt ten times, and that gives you an idea of the level of abhorrence and loathing the Jews of that time felt toward Samaritans.

So, the woman was *persona non grata* at the well. It had been made abundantly clear in previous visits—by the numerous dirty looks, rolled eyes and cutting remarks she received—that that nobody wanted her there. No one wanted anything at all to do with her. She was an unwelcome intruder on this turf. That's the way it was for Samaritans back then—a lot like the way it seems to be for many Muslims and immigrants in our country and in much of Western Europe today. Go back where you belong. You're dangerous. You're not like us. You don't worship God the way we do. You're taking away all of our jobs. Stay out. We don't want you here.

And besides being a despised Samaritan, there was the woman's "reputation." She had a bad one. Very bad. Really, truly bad. She had as contemptible and disgraceful a reputation as a woman could possibly have. Multiple marriages. Living with a man out of wedlock. Which meant she obviously had loose morals. She was no better than a prostitute, really.

And maybe she was actually worse, because a woman usually turned to prostitution out of desperation, when there was no other option, so she could put food on her table. This woman freely chose to do what she did.

So, there she was, bucket in hand, at high noon, at *Jacob's Well*. She heaved a sigh of relief because it looked like she was alone, which meant, thankfully, that at least today she wouldn't have to put up with the snide comments and disgusted stares of others. Then suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she saw him. He was sitting down, so she hadn't noticed him right away. She didn't recognize the man. He was a complete stranger.

It was obvious to her wary, observant eye that he was tired and thirsty. He must have been a traveler passing through on his way to somewhere else. It was best to just ignore him; to carry on, get what she came here for and then return home to her . . . to who? Who was the man she was in a relationship with? What was he to her? Not her husband, of course. So, was he her roommate? Her friend? Her lover?

The woman's thoughts were interrupted when the stranger asked her for a drink of water. What was this? A Jew addressing a Samaritan without revulsion or animosity? She was caught completely off guard. Give me a drink of water, he said. It was a simple request, and an understandable one, too, considering how hot it was. She actually felt a little sorry for him. But, sympathy aside, she couldn't resist throwing a bit of cynicism his way. God knows that Jews did much worse things to her people. "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?"

The man responded in so many words that she didn't realize just who it was she was being cynical toward. Because if she did know who was asking her for water, she would have asked—no, begged—for a drink from him. "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

As was so often the case with those who listened to Jesus, the Samaritan woman didn't understand. "Living water? What the heck was that?" Jesus seemed to enjoy speaking to people in riddles. The problem was, when he did that it was easy to hear what he was saying but not so easy to discern what he meant. "You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep," the woman said with just the hint of a smile. "Where can you get this living water?"

Give the woman credit. She was trying to get it, asking logical follow-up questions. Instead of simply turning away from Jesus in frustration and going on with her business, she was attempting to understand. So Jesus, with hope and love in his heart, continued his conversation with her. "Everyone who drinks water from this well will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

"Sir," she responded (please note the sudden respect she showed

Jesus, who was still a despised Jew, when she thought he could give her an endless supply of water without all the hard work and oppressive heat). “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” As hard as she was trying, she was still clueless. She just wasn’t getting it.

So Jesus patiently and graciously switched gears and tried another tactic—even though it would surely cause her some embarrassment and discomfort. “Go,” Jesus told her, “call your husband and come back.”

The Samaritan woman instantly realized that, whether he knew it or not, this stranger was cracking open the door to a dark and very shameful part of her life. But it seemed pointless for her to deny what everyone else in the region (and worst of all what she herself), already knew. So she took a deep breath and confessed to him, “I have no husband.” And Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

So, why did Jesus decide to go there? Why did he choose to broach that awkward subject and bring up the woman’s scandalous personal and sexual history? Was he trying to make her feel bad or hurt her feelings or embarrass her? Was it really necessary? I think Jesus did it because if that part of her life wasn’t touched on; if he had left it alone and shined no light on it, then what was the point of their conversation? It wouldn’t have had any relevance to the woman. It wouldn’t have changed her life one bit. After they ended their conversation Jesus would have left her the way he found her, and the Samaritan woman would have remained stuck in her hopeless, dead-end existence.

But because Jesus did hold that disreputable part of her life up to the light and gently forced her to confront it, to acknowledge the reality of it, that gave her the reality check she needed to open herself to God’s grace and change her perspective about the way she was living her life, which ultimately put her on the path to salvation.

The Samaritan woman didn’t seem to mind what Jesus did. In fact, rather than being angry or ashamed because of what Jesus told her about herself, she was so excited, so enlivened by Jesus’ knowledge about her that she totally forgot why she had come to *Jacob’s Well* in the first place. “Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ‘Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?’”

This story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman turns out to be a love story. I say this because only someone who loves you wants to know everything about you and knows you intimately, as you really are, warts and all, and not as you

pretend to be.

Only someone who loves you understands your deepest longings and desires, your true needs, perhaps better than you yourself understand them.

Only someone who loves you will look at your life with its innumerable wrong turns, disastrous decisions and bad choices, and do it without blinking, criticizing, or judging.

We Christians hear a lot about God's love: God's love for us in Christ, and Jesus' sacrificial love for us as expressed on the cross. It's written about all through the New Testament, and it's preached about, sung about and prayed about pretty much every Sunday in church. But the genuine power and depth of divine love we Christians celebrate can only truly be experienced when we come to discover, with amazement and deep gratitude, that God's love is always there for us; even, and maybe even especially after Jesus tells us everything we ever did, and the things he tells us aren't so great.

Writer Anne LaMotte, in her autobiographical book *Traveling Mercies*, described her experience of receiving God's love after Jesus told her everything she ever did. And what she had done and was going through at the time was bad. When she had her encounter with Christ, her life was ravaged by alcoholism, drug abuse and deep depression. One day, while her life was falling apart, she laid down on her bed and tried to sleep. She wrote:

"After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my deceased father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there. Of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

"And I was appalled . . .

I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, 'I would rather die.'

"I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with. Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning, he was gone.

"This experience spooked me badly, but I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood. But try as I might to escape it, everywhere I went I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me open the

door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. . . .

“One week later, I returned to the church [I had been stealthily visiting by sneaking in and sitting in the back pew, listening to the music and then sneaking out again before the minister could get to the pulpit to begin his sermon]. I was so hungover that I couldn’t stand up to sing the hymns, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials; but the last hymn was so deep and raw and pure that I couldn’t escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me.

“I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God’s own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said . . . ‘I quit.’ I took a long, deep breath and said out loud, ‘All right. You can come in.’

“So, this was my beautiful moment of conversion.”

One thing we can take away from both the story of the Samaritan woman who encountered Jesus at *Jacob’s Well* and Anne LaMotte’s powerful conversion experience, is that our lives are much more open and receptive to God’s grace and love after we have an encounter with Jesus and he tells us everything we ever did—yes, even that—but we come to find out, much to our amazement and gratitude, that he still loves us. Even in our imperfectness, our Lord still follows us around like a proverbial cat at our heels, waiting and hoping for us to let him in.

My friends, Jesus knows us backwards and forwards, inside and out; yet even with the dark things he knows about our lives, things about us we’re not at all proud of, such as anger, hatred, hardheartedness, lust, greed and envy, he doesn’t walk away from us. Rather, he continues to love us and calls us to a transformed, better life for ourselves and for God. Yes, the story of the Samaritan woman’s encounter with Jesus at the well is a love story; and it’s still being told today. But now, we’re the ones who get to have the encounter, if we allow it.

We’re the ones Jesus stops and talks to, asks questions of, and tells us everything we ever did.

And we’re the ones Jesus invites to drink the living water he offers, which will become a spring in us welling up to Eternal Life.

To which I pray, "Come to us, Lord Jesus, and give us your living water so we may drink deeply of it, our thirst for God can be satisfied, and we will never be thirsty again. Thanks be to God. Amen.