

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts  
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on March 15, 2020 (III Lent, Year A)**

Water. It figures that as we sit here in an empty church, joined by many of you online, the gospel appointed for today would revolve around water. Water gives life and growth, it cleanses and purifies; through the water of baptism emerges our very relationship with Jesus Christ. And, these days, it is used to wash our hands. Again and again and again.

But here we are at a well, a source of water, a source of life, for this encounter between Jesus and the unnamed Samaritan woman known to us only as “the woman at the well.”

In the ancient world, wells were critical places. *With* them, life could be sustained. *Without* them, it could not. So to have a well was literally a matter of life or death. And they were also communal meeting places. In the Book of Genesis, Isaac and Jacob both meet their future wives at wells. In Exodus, Moses meets *his* future wife at a well. Apparently wells were the match.com of ancient Palestine. And here we are at what John calls, “Jacob’s well.” This is, presumably, the very same place where Jacob first met Rachel. And so Jesus speaks to this woman at a site central to the spiritual identity of Israel.

And it’s at this well-known well, this traditional meeting place, that a scandalous encounter unfolds. So often in Jesus’ engagements with others he shatters our preconceived notions, and challenges us to think in new ways. You deem someone untouchable? Jesus touches them. You deem someone undesirable? Jesus desires them. You deem someone unlovable? Jesus loves them.

Over and over again, Jesus breaks down barriers between and among people; he tramples upon idols made of human hands and flips our precious and deeply held notions of social decorum. This encounter with the woman at the well is no less radical than eating with tax collectors and sinners or hanging out with lepers and the demon-possessed. In fact, this may be the most radical encounter of them all.

Because by the deep traditions and binding cultural norms of the day a Jewish teacher like Jesus would *never* have entered into Samaritan territory. He would never have spoken with a *Samaritan*. He certainly would never have spoken with a Samaritan *woman*. And he *most* certainly would never have spoken with a *divorced* Samaritan woman. Not in private, not in public. And the mere thought of drinking from a divorced Samaritan woman’s bucket was beyond unimaginable. You can almost hear the disciples screaming, ‘Stay away! Avoid this woman! Your reputation is at stake! What are people going to think?’ But Jesus speaks with her. He reaches out to her. He offers divine relationship. He touches the untouchable.

And that’s what Jesus does for us. Jesus knows us to the depths of our souls and loves us anyway. In the same way, he doesn’t judge this woman’s past sins. Instead he lifts her up as a model of growing faith. Which is how Jesus sees us as well. His knowledge of our inherent sinfulness doesn’t condemn us. Rather it gives us the freedom to be loved. We can’t hide anything from Jesus and that nakedness allows us to enter ever more deeply into authentic relationship with him.

Today we worship in “spirit and in truth,” as Jesus puts it. We certainly aren’t worshipping in person. But for however long this season lasts, we will continue to worship in spirit and in truth. The church is so much more than a particular building. As much as we love them and care for them and, occasionally even turn them into idols, faith doesn’t depend on physical structures. The church is not the building, but its people; it is all of you. Whether we gather in-person or remotely, Jesus walks with us and abides with us and loves us. He accompanies us through fear and uncertainty and even through the very valley of the shadow of death.

Friends, I do mourn the loss of our communal interaction amid this time of social distancing. We are removed from one another precisely because we love one another. This morning I desperately miss being with all of you. I miss greeting you before worship, I miss celebrating and sharing the sacrament with you, I miss seeing your outstretched hands at the communion rail, I miss giving out high fives to all our children as they race past me to get the good stuff at coffee hour.

But know this. We are gathered together this morning at a well. It may be a virtual well. But it is a deep well full of the living water that is relationship with Jesus Christ. I bid you to drink deeply of this living water. Everything else in this life leaves us thirsting for more. But faith in Jesus quenches even our deepest thirst, and quells even our deepest fears. So, drink, be satisfied, and revel in the wonder of God’s love for you.