

James 3:13-18

John 4:5-15, 27-30

On this day as we celebrate the 175th anniversary of the Presbyterian women in this community, we get to meet this *particular* woman, the unnamed woman of Samaria, and spend some time with her by the well. It's a peaceful place, here by the well, but it is also a place where we are challenged to welcome each other in ways that might feel uncomfortable, where we risk being *fully* seen by God in all of our messiness and beauty, where we might be told truths about ourselves and our communities that are uncomfortable to hear. Being seen and known by God can be terrifying, but also profoundly healing. So I invite you into that space today.

Whatever you carry with you into this worship service, your worries, insecurities, and distractions, I invite you to honor their reality, and then set them down at the well. For indeed our story here begins with Jesus, tired out by his journey, sitting by the well, pausing to catch his breath in the midst of what was likely a busy day and a busy week. His friends have continued on to the city to buy food, and Jesus is taking in the sights, sounds, and smells of this local well, a place where generations of people have come to retrieve the water they need for cooking, cleaning, washing children, tending to crops, and relieving their thirst. This is a place with a long history, where for years people from all different walks of life have converged to meet their basic human need for water.

For me, it's tempting to jump straight ahead to where Jesus offers living water to the woman. Reading Jesus as a teacher and giver, someone in a position of power, is a comfortable place for me. But his initial moment of vulnerability with this woman is important, too. Jesus is alone. It is noon, the sun is likely beating down, he might be hungry waiting for his friends to return with food, and he's certainly thirsty because as soon as another person appears he asks her for a drink. Jesus himself is in a position of need here. The well is deep, and he has no bucket. While we can name the reality that he is Christ, the son of God, full of grace and power, this is also a story where Jesus is intensely human. A strange woman approaches. She's a Samaritan, a person with a different set of religious and cultural beliefs from Jesus, and even if she shared a cultural background with him, what might people say if

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they see this man chatting with a woman alone at this well? Jesus has every reason *not* to engage with the woman, and yet he does, and in his own vulnerability, he asks her for a drink of water. Beginning in that place of openness and need, Jesus quickly launches into a full conversation with this woman where he offers her something that she needs as well, saying “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

I didn’t read this entire passage aloud this morning—it’s a very long story—but you might return to it yourself later. In this section in the middle, Jesus has a long conversation with this woman, again an unconventional choice. They talk about her complicated marital history, naming realities that likely add to this woman’s vulnerability. Jesus doesn’t condemn or judge her, he listens, and he hears her. They talk about the proper location for worship, and Jesus truly dialogues with this woman, not telling her what to believe in a domineering way, but conversing, sharing his thoughts and hearing hers. The woman tells Jesus that she knows the Messiah is coming to proclaim all things, and he responds “I am he. The one who is speaking to you.” For Jesus, proclaiming the truth of the universe is not a loud, domineering declaration, but a conversation, where he sees, names, and understands the fullness of this woman’s life experience.

After they are done talking, when the woman returns to her community, she tells them “Come and see a man who told me *everything* I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” Out of their shared vulnerability by the well, this woman has felt herself witnessed in a way that she surely did not expect. Rather than being lectured or rebuked for anything about her life story, this woman is welcomed, called in to dialogue, and sent away with the profound knowledge that someone knows her and cares for her. Throughout this story, this woman who might be used to being overlooked, is intensely visible. And that can be a really frightening place to be in. How does it feel when we are fully seen by people around us? How does it feel when we are fully known by God? All at once it can be empowering and terrifying. Will I be thought of differently if it’s all on display?

When I was in my first year of seminary I went to a retirement celebration for our beloved chapel director, Troy Messenger, along with two of my friends. We had received minimal information about this event, but we showed up because we loved Troy’s work in the chapel. The three of us were wearing T-shirts, shorts, and backpacks, coming straight from an evening class. A few steps into the gathering and we knew we were out of place—everyone else was dressed up, most were at least 40 years older than us, we hardly knew anyone other than Troy himself, and to make it even worse we realized we were some of the last to arrive and there were hardly any seats left. We wanted to be there,

though, so the three of us hovered uncomfortably at the side of the room, content to haphazardly balance our tiny plates of carrots and dip and trying not to attract too much attention or spill too much ranch dressing on the floor. There were no seats for us at any table we could see, but we shared looks of agreement between ourselves—Yes hiding in the corner was probably where the improperly dressed, poorly connected, late, confused grad students belonged. We were just fine staying invisible.

Imagine our horror then, when another retired professor, someone we admired from afar but didn't know personally, hurried toward us and said matter-of-factly: "You all need a place to sit. Why not here?" Janet Walton gestured to a set of chairs that were not tucked to the side, but up on the room's raised platform, in clear view of everyone in attendance. We tried to dismiss the offer, we were happy to hover in the corner, but she insisted. Soon after we sat down, she reappeared, emerging from a dusty storage space with a small circular table with rickety, detached legs. It was the kind of thing you'd find in someone's garden shed, not at an elegant retirement ceremony. But Professor Walton knew where it was, and knew we needed a table to sit at, so she rolled it out, ready with a fancy white tablecloth to cover it with once it was assembled. As we helped her connect those wobbly legs to the bottom of the table, she remarked "This is just what we do, we're women, sometimes we have to make space for *ourselves* in these places." That evening, she saw the three sheepish new seminary students, young women content to be overlooked in the corner, and she invited us to be fully seen. To have a place at the table. Like Jesus at the well, she told us something true about ourselves—that we mattered and deserved to sit down—and then she did the work to make it so that we could.

As we celebrate the long legacy of Presbyterian Women this Sunday, I think about all the many strong, determined, wise women who have come before us to create a place at the table where there was no place given to them. Those who have met outsiders at the well with curiosity and radical hospitality. They are grandmothers and aunts, teachers and community leaders, mothers, and women who felt like mothers. And they aren't just women, they are people of all genders who were willing to bring a prophetic perspective to the world, to imagine and fight for more welcome, more invitation, more openness. You know them well, a particular face might pop into your mind as I speak of folks like this. I'm so thankful for the determination and resilience of each of those trailblazers who have defied the odds to help make more room at the well. Still, God calls us to create a world together where

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individuals don't have to be those rare pillars of strength creating inclusion. God calls us all to build a *community* where we can all be honest about our vulnerabilities and invite others into that healing place as well. Whether we feel like we are on the outside because of our gender, our sexuality, our race, our relationship history, or the things we are afraid to show to anyone else. God fully sees us, fully knows us, and then offers us living water.

Often the times when we most need help are also when we are most eager to not be seen in our vulnerability. When we feel our peace unraveling, we may want to become invisible. We hope we can sneak away to the well at high noon when the place is deserted, get our groceries without running into a neighbor who knows what is going on in our lives, hover at the side of the retirement party where no one will notice our jean shorts in a sea of dress pants. We can build up layers of protection for ourselves: smiling photos on Facebook, calendars so full of meetings that we won't have to think about the things that are hard, meals with friends where we complain or distract ourselves from what we don't want to think about.

But as our first Scripture reading from James reminded us, these tactics—perhaps of avoidance, perhaps of self-protection—are often rooted in the wisdom of humanity rather than the wisdom of God. It is wisdom that is often self-serving and leaves us with half-truths about who we are and who God is, and how fully loved we might truly be. In contrast, James tells us that God's wisdom is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. God's wisdom is Jesus calling to the woman at the well, offering her living water and telling her everything she's ever done. Meeting her in mutual vulnerability, fully knowing her, and fully loving her.

In my first couple months as a resident minister, one of my greatest joys has been connecting with the small group of saints beginning to form the diversity, inclusion, accessibility, and accountability group (DIAA). These folks have seen some of the places in our church community where we haven't extended true hospitality to all, and are calling us to think prophetically about how we make that better. How do you feel when you walk through the doors of this church? Do you worry someone might see something about you that makes you stand out? Do you long for someone to notice those gifts of God that make up who you are? That DIAA group is thinking about how we all enter spaces and communities at First Pres, and how we might make some of those moments of entering newness feel a little less daunting and a little more welcoming, especially for people who have had their values questioned or demeaned in other places in this world.

So as we do life together, I wonder how we might all embody the love, welcome, and challenge that Jesus demonstrates in his mutual vulnerability with the woman at the well. He asks for a drink of

water, and he offers living water. As he encounters this new friend, he doesn't rebuke her, but witnesses the fullness of her reality, telling her everything she has ever done, and inviting her into relationship. God meets us with this openness and calls us to meet one another with curiosity and hopefulness, receptive to the possibilities we might not yet see. Being fully known and fully knowing others is not an easy task. But what a gift that we get to do it together, and we get to do it with God.

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