

*The Third Sunday of Lent*  
*Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

*February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008*

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour*  
*Mill Valley, California*

*At the Well of Life*  
*The Rev. Richard E. Helmer*

It must have been an ordinary day when the central character of today's gospel, the Samaritan woman, started out for the well of Jacob. Like her ancestors before her she organized her life around this place of water, this place as old as memory where the essential ingredient of life could be drawn so that the daily tasks could be done and the rhythm would continue.

The Samaritan woman has no name. That's quite remarkable, really, if you think about it for very long. For someone as important as this in John's purposeful telling of the Gospel, it is a curious thing. But, perhaps as one living outside the mainstream Jewish tradition, she is an outsider's outsider – she is a reflection of those who live just beyond our doors of comfort.

When she meets Jesus at the well, she must have been puzzled by the presence of this Jewish man at a Samaritan sacred site. He belonged somewhere else. Not here. Not talking with her, to be certain. And absolutely not asking to share a drink of water with her. Jews and Samaritans share nothing in common.

Yet, Jesus demands a drink. But then he talks to her, a Samaritan. . . and a Samaritan woman at that. . . a person that any faithful Jew of his day would have carefully avoided in the best of times. She's a bit of a heretic. And she clearly has a reputation, which Jesus almost matter-of-factly puts on the line after baiting her a little bit.

Is he demonstrating omniscience by telling her that she has been married five times. . . and is now living in a relationship without benefit of marriage? Or I like to think he probably overheard gossip at or near the well – it was a public place after all, and Sychar would have been a bit like Mill Valley where everyone knows everyone else's business, right? Certainly in her own time, and even to our 21<sup>st</sup>-century ears, she's a bit of a misfit. She arrives around noon when all the other women have probably gone, meaning she's probably been shunned by her neighbors.<sup>1</sup> When Jesus airs her dirty laundry for her, her response has a little more than a hint of sarcasm: "I see, sir, that you are a prophet." And who wants one of those sniffing around the place, right?

Her journey with Christ begins with her dirty laundry, this scandal at the center of her life. But Jesus sees deeper than that. Amongst her dirty laundry, a life that probably scandalized most of her neighbors, Jesus knows that she is seeking something that might have little to do with marriage or adultery. Clearly, she is bold.

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<sup>1</sup> *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* by Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, pp. 98.

She talks to Jesus almost as an equal. Maybe her problem with men-in-general in her age may be simply that she speaks her mind. She is a seeker – looking for relationship in a world where women are viewed more as property than persons. And she has yet to find what she really needs.

And then, in the great theological conversation that ensues, she finds much more than she thought she needed. This is more than about cleaning her dirty laundry. Water rising up to eternal life. Messiah looking her in the face with a kind of judgment she least expects. She expects judgment like that of her neighbors: judgment of shunning and rejection. Instead, she receives this judgment: God is not found uniquely here at the well, nor in Jerusalem – the Samaritans nor the religious elites of ancient Israel have a lock on the Kingdom of God. No, God is to be found everywhere, even in the human heart, in the deep places of life within, no matter how sullied our lives have become. God is even amongst our dirty laundry, our secret scandals, and our darkness. Most of all, God is in our thirsts for that which will not satisfy us.

Do you notice the woman leaves the jar behind when she returns to Sychar?

My brothers and sisters, we are, of course, each in our own way, the Samaritan woman at the well. Alone and sometimes feeling like an outsider, we encounter a stranger, a foreigner – this Christ – who seems to know more about us than we might or should want him to know. . . including all of our secrets – the dirty laundry we prefer not to air in public – the scandals whether little or great that mark our lives and remind us of our imperfections and sense of unworthiness.

All of us show up to the well of life sooner or later to take a drink. We have to. It's in our nature to ask the questions of why and what for. We desire to know where we are going and what to do about the rough edges in our fragile existence. We thirst for the mysterious water that might give us insight into where we came from and where we might be headed. And yet we often turn to things that will not satisfy that thirst, and we hoard them.

And yet the message is that Christ is there, at the well, waiting for us. Ready to engage us, call us, re-forge us with words we don't expect and insights we can scarcely imagine. With a judgment that resides beyond our way of judging. Part of the grace we receive is that we are called – away from our old selves and into new ways of being. We begin by thirsting for the water that will not satisfy us and then we discover, because Christ meets us, that we are given water that springs to overflowing into eternal life. God in Christ starts out with the raw material of our misdirected thirsts and then nourishes us with the Living Water that rises up from within. We are cleansed from the inside out, often to our great surprise. Like the woman at the well, we've been searching for a long time for someone else to cleanse us from the outside in! But that's not how God works. . .

And now we are set on a new path with a Gospel that sets free us and helps us free others, just as the Samaritan woman was freed. . . and was able to leave the jar behind. Perhaps, like the people of Samaria, we will ask Christ to stay with us a time and at last learn from our own hearts what it means to declare him Messiah, Son of the Living God!