

## “Woman at the Well”

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What a month this has been-- a month of holiday weekends: Presidents' Day; Valentine's Day; and that great American holiday, Super Bowl Sunday, February 3, celebrated this year by more than 97 million television viewers.

The way that different households celebrate Super Bowl Sunday is something interesting to behold. It's generally understood that more men want to watch the game than women do. Why is this?

Georgetown University Professor Deborah Tannen, the author of *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, (a New York Times best seller for nearly four years.) gives us a clue. She comments (in a slight paraphrase) that "saying that men talk about football (and watch football) in order to avoid talking about their feelings is the same as saying that women talk about their feelings in order to avoid talking about football."

I've mentioned before the prison warden in the movie "Cool Hand Luke," saying to Paul Newman, the convict being locked up in solitary confinement, "What we have is a failure to communicate." Jesus encountered a "failure to communicate" many times in his ministry. Certainly we have it vividly portrayed as this morning we hear about him with the Woman at the Well.

This Gospel story is special in several ways. Jesus talks longer to the woman at the well than he does to anyone else in all the Gospels-- longer than he talks to any of his disciples, longer than he talks to any of his accusers, longer than he talks to any of his own family. She is the first outsider to guess who he is and tell others. She is the first evangelist, John tells us, and her testimony brings many to faith.

The scene opens as Jesus meets the woman at the well, which was at the center of village life. The woman was there because she needed water for her household and such a trip was a daily necessity. Jesus is there because he was tired and thirsty, walking from Jerusalem to Galilee.

Jesus begins the conversation by simply asking her for a drink. Then the woman replies to this stranger and asks, "How can you ask *me* for a drink?" From that point on, a simple conversation becomes difficult and complex.

There are several reasons why Jesus and the woman had difficulties in communication. To say the very least, it was not either culturally, or socially, or "PC"- politically correct for Jesus even to be talking to the woman. Men, much less rabbis, just didn't have public conversations with women like this. The law in Leviticus forbade a Jew even to greet his own wife in public. Moreover, this woman had a bad reputation. Somehow Jesus knew that she had had five husbands and was now living with a man who was not her husband.

Compounding the problem, she was a Samaritan, a people historically at odds with Israel. They were political enemies dating back to the captivity in Babylon. The Samaritans were also religious adversaries and always the underdog to the Jews in number and power.

This well-known story is a classic illustration of what I call the "invisible plate glass window" of cultural, social, and political communication walls that have separated people down through the centuries. Certainly we see this in our never-ending search for peace in the Middle East. And I am thinking even closer of the ways that this is being played out in our presidential primary season.

Given their historical differences it was understandable that the woman said to Jesus, "how can you ask *me* for a drink?" Characteristically in his dialogues, Jesus doesn't answer her directly but tries to make a larger point. This obviously confused her—(and I think may indeed have confused you too this morning as you read and heard it!) He says "If you knew who I am, you would ask *me* for a drink and I would give you water that would satisfy you forever"

You probably have already picked up the important clue to what's happening. Like Nicodemus talking with Jesus in the Gospel last Sunday, they are not really talking to each other: they are on two different wavelengths, two different levels, talking past each other. This is the most serious kind of "failure to communicate."

As we are often apt to do, the woman is thinking very literally. She goes on to say, "How can you give me a drink? You don't even have a bucket, and the well is deep. This is the best well in the countryside. It is here as a memorial to our ancestor Jacob. Are you greater than he was?" This is what I call "flatland" thinking, seeing everything only on its surface.

Certainly we almost take for granted the availability of water nowadays. Water was a precious commodity in Jesus time, but thanks to the miracles of modern technology, people have running water now in modern-day Israel, in the same way that there is enough water to irrigate 144 golf courses in Scottsdale, Arizona. We take tap water for granted, but if you think you can satisfy your taste buds better with bottled water, just look at the choices waiting for you at your favorite supermarket!

The thirst for even more and more varieties of water is clearly a sign of the thirst in our lives for *more* of everything. Some of the excitement of the Super Bowl for many people is not just the game itself but in the commercials for more, better, and new products: new brands of beer, new shapes and styles of cars, new travel destinations, more temporary satisfactions.

Jesus tries to draw the woman out of that "flatland" and into a level of thinking that embraces a "more" of life that is deep within and yet is beyond what we can see or define. Picking up a case of bottled water on sale gives you the satisfaction of getting a bargain and having those temporary satisfactions available for a few days. But this is not the "Living water" that Jesus is talking about. "Living Water" is a metaphor for the quality that quenches the deepest and most profound thirst of our spirits for the "more" in life, for the love of God which St. Paul says in the epistle this morning is literally "poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit."

Jesus was then, and always is, trying to direct our attention from the immediate necessities and cravings of life to the ultimate satisfactions. All of us need food and drink and money, but we need so much more than that. We need spirit, motivation, desire, aims, and goals. Without them all the money, all the food and drink, all the new places to go and products and gadgets we can buy, in the long run will never give us the "inner" things--whatever you want to call them-

- peace, unity, direction, happiness, usefulness, and zest for living, that everyone of us really needs.

But the conversation between Jesus and the woman never quite hits that mark. The woman in her understandable confusion finally says, "well, when the Messiah comes he will give us all the answers." She was doing what we all usually do: putting off to the future answers that are really demanded today. So finally Jesus is moved to say what he has earlier been reluctant to say to others, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

I leave it to you to decide what you think of the woman as the story ends. Actually, like so many good stories, it really is open-ended. She has not exactly been converted, but she does go back to her Samaritan city with the message, "Can this be the Christ?" At least her witness is an invitation to "come and see." They do go, and then return to say, "This is indeed the Savior of the world."

Now in this season of Lent, when we may or may not have realized the depth of our spiritual thirst, the words of the woman at the well are spoken to us, "come and see." Jesus' promise of "Living Water" may be as vague to you as it was to her, but he asks only of one thing of you this morning, come to the altar as a seeker and searcher. Come to the altar knowing that you are thirsty and hungry for more at the deepest levels of your life.

Look around you! Come as a seeker and a searcher! Come and see! Lift your eyes to see Jesus. For it is Jesus the Christ who is still fulfilling his promise to give us, in this parish and wherever our lives take us, the Living Water of his energizing, thirst-quenching Spirit! AMEN