The Bethel Pulpit

Pastor Paul N. Svingen

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5th Major Sunday – "Water of Life"

BETHEL
LUTHERAN CHURCH
On the web at www.bethel-madison.org
312 Wisconsin Ave. Madison WI 53703

Text: John 4:4-30
Title: The Jars We Leave Behind

Today, **we're at the well**. A well **can be Good News**…. Life-saving, especially if it **produces good water**. Water saves lives. **De-hydration costs lives**.

Of all the **twists and turns** in today's Gospel, I suspect it is true that **the one which most likely identifies the woman at the well** for many of us is the line where Jesus says to her, ***"You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband."*** There's the "**defining reality**" of this Samaritan woman …**some would be quick to say**! What can Jesus **do for her**? …. except **ask her to give him a drink?**

Five husbands. We know her type…. **we think**! But **do we**? A lady of the streets? The **text doesn't say that**. Self-centered, demanding, immature, impatient, deal-ing with a drinking problem, unable to bear children and hiding the fact from her husbands? **We don't know any of that**…. with any degree of certainty. She **may not have had a shady past**.

Mother's Day, three years ago, I officiated at the first wedding of Susan's older cousin…an only child whose birth father died, then her step-father died, and finally her second step-father died….of an illness. I had the grieving widow's funeral some years ago and yes, Velma was an honorable, Oklahoma-born, Southern Baptist woman very much committed to her church and to the Lord. Are we to judge her because she was legitimately married three times?

As to the **woman at the well**, John doesn't tell us that **her current state** is the **result of her sin**. She could have been **widowed, or abandoned, or divorced**. Five weddings **seems a bit much**, but **not impossible**…. even for those **not sparkling** in the **glow of Hollywood's kind of glamour**. She may have even been **living with someone** she was dependent upon or, married to her **deceased husband's brother** (in order that an heir to her deceased husband **might be born)** (a Levirite marriage…thus she **not being technically married to the brother**). We don't know all the details … as is descriptive even of **our understandings of our own families**. Yes.., **You and I carry the tendency** to "**fill in the gaps**", but frequently we're dead wrong! This woman's story **may bear more of the marks of tragedy than scandal**.

One thing we **don't want to miss**. Jesus **neither invites her to repent** nor does he **speak of sin**. He recognizes her **limitations and weaknesses** and **still gives her "living water."** After Jesus **describes her past to her**…., she asks him where she should worship. Talk about **a turning point**. **Getting on to her future**. Not dwell-ing on her past…. or **bound by it**. Trusting her future to this man who **honored her** by first **asking her for a drink**…. even though it was **obvious** that she had **no bucket to draw the water**.

The Word for the Day is that **Jesus always stands beside us**…. no matter the number of **bends in the road** that have **marked our life story** and our faith journey. **Jesus sits by the deepest well**. He places **himself at our side** in the most monumental **tasks and the most hopeless situations**. Throughout the Gospel of John, **Jesus is the living water, the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate, the Good Shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the true vine**…for the branches that we are, and he is **the way, the truth, and the life**. He is right **next to us**, in the heat of the day and **at the height of our fatigue**. As **we, like the Samaritan woman** stand beside a deep well with **no bucket**, our spiritual **sustenance is not a distant prize to be earned.** The **food that feeds our spirit** is a **close resource**. It is **around us, within us.., and every moment ours to claim**.

"I see that you are a prophet" she says to Jesus. After the resurrection, it was Thomas who said, "**Unless I see the nail marks… I will not believe**." He needed what Alan Culpepper calls a "**recognition scene**." Remember what the **women saw** at the early morning tomb? And Peter, James and John? They wanted to "**see"** so that they could believe, BUT**, it was only as they believed**…. at the **end of the Emmaus Road, at table with Jesus,** that they believed…and THUS, they **saw Jesus** …… as their risen Lord and Savior. Believe… and then see. **Jesus loves you. Believe it!**

The **Good News is here for us too folks**. Like the **woman at the well**, we too can feel that everything is **stacked against us**. As Christians and members of the church, **we can feel like we are losing a "faith hold**" in an increasingly unchurch-ed society. One of our own seminary faculty has **declared that**: a) denominations are **confusing in a post-Christian world** and often an **impediment to mission, b)** The differences between the major denominations are relatively minor, c) **inord-inate amounts of funding** are spent on maintaining denominational **structures and bureaucracies**, money that **could be spent on mission,** d) **political differ-ences outstripped theological differences decades** ago, and, e) denominational affiliation often represents the **triumph of ethnic and cultural loyalties** over theological convictions. We **ARE in a changed and changing church**… and like the **woman at the well**, we dare not "**pass up**" offering the **cup of living water** that **Jesus is still asking of us** as we come to the "**wellspring of life**"

What is it, do you think, **that holds us back from staying engaged in the crucial conversation with Jesus that invites our response to his invitation to living into the future God has prepared for us?** What **keeps us bound to our past**: **its practices, its habits, its losses its gains?** What holds us back from acting upon the promise carried by the **news of what God has done**, and **is doing through us** …. **now**? What are the **jars we would like to leave behind,** trading our **past losses and tragedies** and **present challenges** for the **living water** Jesus offers? No, **the life story** of this Samaritan woman **may not have been** scandalous at all. The scandal **was** that **the one who gave her the living water chose to die so that she**, and **each one of us**, might life **with the hope that our life has been redeemed** … for good!

Of course, there are those **who haven't found jobs**, much less fulfilling jobs. There are those **in unfulfilling relationships**, or **no relationship** at all. There are past **wounds, and fears about the future**. There is illness of **body, mind, or spirit**. There's **grief**. There's **sadness.** There's **anxiety.** There's **guilt.**

With you today.., **just as you are**.., there is **opportunity to find transformation** to **newness and hope** through **naming and claiming** these things as **realities in our** own lives. Let's **be talking to Jesus "at the wells**" where we come to **draw water**. **Let's have a crucial conversation**!

Deep well… of **anxiety, fear, loneliness, uncertainty**? Come to the Well!

Deep well …. of troubling **regrets**, nagging guilt, faltering faith? Come to the Well!

No bucket? **….. listen** to Jesus… "in **the rustling grass** you can hear him pass", in the **cry of a child**…, in the **song of a bird**, in the **gift of human touch**. He speaks to you…everywhere. Lord, help us to **come to the well of eternal life**. Help each one of us to be a blessing beyond the wells we visit. Amen.