# North Kildonan United Church

12th March 2023 ~*Rev. Don Johnson*

Exodus 17: 1-7 Romans 5: 1-11 John 4: 5-42

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*Lord Jesus Christ, by the power of your presence open the mind of God to us, that in your light we may see light, and in your strength be strong.*

It was noon when a weary and thirsty Jesus sat down to rest at Jacob's well in Samaria. Not a noontime like the ones we have known this winter, sunny yet bitingly cold. No, the noontime in Samaria was sunny and hot, the hottest time of the day, the time of day when sensible people took cover and stayed as cool as they could. Work would be done in the morning or later in the day, when the temperature was more bearable. The wise, the respectable, went to the well in the cool of the morning to get water for the day and perhaps also to have a chat with other friends and neighbours who might be there.

By the time Jesus gets to the well, everyone else has taken cover. But then a single, solitary figure arrives in search of water. A Samaritan woman, out in the blazing sun like she does every day, like she has to do every day, out in public when she knows the public will not be out. Here she is, by herself, knowing that if she comes to the well at noon she will not be harassed or belittled by the respectable townspeople, by those who have a secure place in society, by those who look down on her for her checkered past. She is living on the margins, and has known more than her share of heartbreak and pain. Her life is a monotonous struggle to haul water in the heat of the day, to avoid contact with those who will judge her, to go home to a man who may be like the other men in her life who have let her down, and left her. Life is not great for this nameless Samaritan woman.

And then, Jesus breaks through the desperation of her life. He simply asks her, human to human, equal to equal, for a drink of water. Doesn't he realize who he's talking to, she may be thinking to herself. So she reminds him that he is a Jew and she a Samaritan and they aren't supposed to mix. But he is also a man and she a woman and they really shouldn't be talking together this way. And she is a woman with such a past that the locals avoid her. A triple threat – ethnic restrictions between Jews and Samaritans, gender boundaries to keep males and females from socializing, and societal norms that declare the Samaritan woman has a history with men not in keeping with the standards of the community.

But Jesus needs water and he sees her as someone who can help him quench his thirst. He does not see a Samaritan woman despised by her neighbours; he sees a human being, worthy of God's love and care. He does not perpetuate the old divisions

of race and clan, of Jew and Samaritan keeping their distance of one another, each seeing themselves as superior to the other. Rather, he breaks down the barrier between them. And in speaking about the five husbands in her past, and the current man in her life, Jesus does not condemn her the way some do. Instead, Jesus has compassion for her.

After all, five men had divorced her, abandoned her in a day and age when divorced women did not fare at all well. In the time of Jesus a man could divorce his wife on the flimsiest of grounds-inability to bear children or even bad cooking. So perhaps she was unable to bear children, a painful circumstance to begin with, and then husband after husband adds to her shame and distress by divorcing her. And who knows what the intentions of the present man are, except that by not marrying her, he's clearly not committing himself to her long-term care and companionship and security.

Jesus does not condemn her nor does he tell her to repent and change her ways. Instead he speaks of the inclusive nature of God, of worship that transcends human divisions and limitations, of worship that includes even her and all of her Samaritan kin: "God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:24)

Her story is not unique. In his commentary on this passage Robert Hoch writes: "Perhaps the way of life for women on the streets is instructive. Many women who live on the streets have "husbands" – men to whom they "marry" themselves, providing sex in exchange for food and shelter. Popular culture romanticizes marriage, but on the streets being in a partnership often functions as a form of security for women who are acutely vulnerable to predators. These exchanges may offer a measure of security, but only a measure: these marriages often come with beatings." He continues:

"Walking the streets of Kansas City with a group of Catholic Workers, we visited with a woman and her "husband" waiting at the bus stop. Her eye was blackened. Her husband was going to court for domestic abuse. One of the Catholic Workers said he remembered the day the beating occurred: 'She came to us the morning it happened. She woke up with him choking her," he said.

Now she joined her "husband" at the bus stop, supporting him as he went to court to face charges of domestic battery. "Marital bliss", sighed one of the workers. Too often they saw this same story repeated: different faces, all-to0-familiar bruises.

He concludes: "How many husbands did she have and was the husband she had now her husband? How many times had she gone to that well of so-called security only to find that the security she hoped for was flimsy and perhaps illusory?"

We don't know how the Samaritan woman's life changed after her encounter with Jesus, but we do know that in her proclamation to her community she became a beloved disciple pointing others to the One who is the Saviour of the world. "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" she

tells her people, and in the words of today's gospel: "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony."

Like so much of John's gospel, this passage is full of imagery and symbolism. The scene happens around Jacob's well, a well that doesn't run dry, just like God's never-ending care for all God's people. And this episode opens with Jesus asking for water. The next time we find Jesus asking for a drink is when, in his final moments on the cross, he cries out: "I thirst". No water is given, just sour wine. But then again, in this text it seems that Jesus doesn't get the water either. The woman, in her life changing encounter with Jesus, forgets about his thirst, and runs off to share her discovery of the Messiah.

But there is something else going on here. Jesus had faith in this woman. He saw her as someone who had the skill and ability to help him in his time of need. But, by his comments about her past relationships, he clearly looked in compassion and understanding at her and saw a hurting, in some ways defeated woman, a woman who had been betrayed and abandoned and abused. And by taking the risk of being seen with her, of talking with her, and of asking of her something that she was able to do for him, he affirmed her worth, her ability, her dignity, her humanity. And he offered her new meaning and purpose and hope in her life. "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

As we just sang:

*"I heard the voice of Jesus say,*
*'Behold, I freely give the living water; thirsty one,*
*stoop down, and drink, and live.'*
*I came to Jesus, and I drank of that life-giving stream;*
*my thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in him."*

It's a profound experience when you know someone has faith in you, when others can see gifts and skills and potential that we ourselves do not see. I have experienced that on my road through ministry and I suspect you too have known the difference it makes when someone encourages us, identifies to us our potential that we have trouble seeing, when others have faith in us to do and to be more than we can imagine.

Let's end on another story about faith and potential.

Bruce Larson tells a story in his book Edge of Adventure. It's about a letter found in a baking-power tin wired to the handle of an old pump, which offered the only hope of drinking water on a very long and seldom-used trail across the Amargosa Desert in the U. S. The letter reads as follows:

*The pump is alright as of June 1932. I put the new leather sucker washer into it, and it ought to last several years. But this leather washer dries out and the pump has got to be primed. Under the white rock, I buried a bottle of water. There's enough water*

*in it to prime the pump, but not if you drink some first. Pour in about one-quarter, and let her soak to wet the leather. Then pour in the rest, medium fast and pump like crazy. You'll get water. The well has never run dry. Have faith. When you get watered up, fill the bottle and put it back like you found it for the next feller. Signed Desert Pete.*

*P.S. Don't go drinking up the water first. Prime the pump with it first, and you'll get all you can hold.*

*The well has never run dry. Have faith. Amen.*