

Exodus 17:1-7  
Psalm 95:6-11  
Romans 5:1-11  
JOHN 4:5-42

## *The Woman at the Well*

Whatever happened to sin?

That's the question the good people of Sychar may have asked themselves. How could such a woman live in their village – a woman who had had five husbands, and now was “shacking up” with someone else? They certainly would have nothing to do with her. Maybe they couldn't actually kick her out of town, but they could make it clear that she was a pariah, and afford her as little social contact as would be possible in a small town.

Divorce was permitted among First Century Palestinian Jews – only at the husband's initiative – but Jews were allowed only three marriages. If the rules for Samaritans were the same, this woman in today's Gospel was way past the limit of the allowable. She was a sinner, the kind of conspicuous one who might have made everyone else feel holier-than-thou by comparison. People can forget that everyone falls far short of the glory of God, whether by miles and in obvious and well-know ways or not.

“Whatever happened to sin?” people might have asked. “It's right here among us. You know – her. But just wait until God's judgment falls on her. Why, it could happen any time. Suppose the Messiah came to this very village – then she'll get what's coming to her.”

We can wonder what the woman herself thought as she did her daily chores. One of the chores which traditionally belonged to women in First Century Palestine was carrying water – that's why Jesus could tell his disciples they could find the room for the Last Supper by following a man who was carrying a jug of water: he was in all likelihood the only man doing so in all of Jerusalem, and then only because Jesus had told him to.

Carrying water. It's easy for us; we walk over to a tap and turn it. Cold, clean drinking-quality water. It still isn't available like that for 2 billion people in the world today, and it wasn't available like that for anybody 2,000 years ago.

People had to go to the town well, wherever that was, lower the bucket down into the well and fill their large, pottery water jug with enough water for drinking, cleaning, cooking and perhaps for domestic animals. It might mean lowering the bucket several times, and in dry seasons it might be quite a long pull getting the bucket back up to fill the water jug again and again. You think women only became athletes when Title IX was passed? I wouldn't have wanted to arm wrestle any of those First Century “babes.”

Imagine, then, a water jug bigger than this [oversize flower pot], made of pottery, which it is, ladies, your job to fill and carry back to your home however far that is.

That's going to be heavy. How, if you have to do this at least once, perhaps twice a day, in a *semi-tropical* hilly country, *what time of day* would you do it?

Yes – dawn and dusk were the usual times for this chore. Now – *what time of day* is it when Jesus encounters this woman? Feel free to look it up on the back of your service leaflets. “It was about noon.” About the hottest time of the day. *No one else is at the well*, the one place in town every household has to send someone to at least daily. This woman is a pariah – she comes to the well only when no one else would be there, and then fills and lugs home her water jar with the burning sun full overhead – followed, perhaps, by glaring eyes from shady places all through the town.

“If you think it's hot for you now, just wait,” one of the villagers might be thinking.

Everyday, the most routine chore reminds her that she is “outside” of the village even while living in it. And she is a woman in a culture which considers women to be property – property of their husbands – and she has been “discarded” five times and now, as a live-in girlfriend, has no legal status at all. And she is a Samaritan, a member of a minority religious sect viewed as heretical and ritually unclean by Jews, who would not ever share, say, a cup of water with such a one.

We don't know the story behind her being married five times and now living with someone else, but we can make an educated guess, based on the fact that divorce in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine was possible *only* at the husband's initiative – women had no rights at all. Settlement? “I'll let you live” was a settlement. Women were discarded like used Kleenex tissues – or more often, intimidated into submission by that prospect.

This is corroborated by what this woman is doing: a woman who had collected five lavish divorce settlements would have hired someone *else* to carry the water jug at 12 noon 365 days a year.

My guess is that this woman was really good-looking (“hot,” even), which every man in her town could understand and want, was strong and interested in a marriage of equals, which *no* man in her town could understand *or* want for long, and naïve, which five men could successfully exploit. After getting used five times, she may have figured, “Why bother getting married? All men are alike. All men want just one thing. I'll never meet a man who treats me with respect.”

And then she carries her water jug to the well for the 4,001<sup>st</sup> time. And she sees that a man is waiting there.

And yes, she is a woman with a past. And a present. And what will be her future? You could say she has “a lot of baggage” when she carries her water jar to the well.

“What is God really like?” was probably not on her mind that day – at first. “Will God drop a lightning bolt on me?” had probably occurred to her – or been suggested by someone. But “Is God actually really about second chances?” Well, my guess is she might have given up hoping, figuring she'd used up her second chances.

And so she, and her water jug, and her baggage, came to the well. How many women around the world have also been tagged as notorious sinners and been cut off by

all the people who called themselves good? How many women with less “baggage” than she have been looked down on, given up on, jeered at or banished by religious authorities? How many women keep on carrying their “baggage” in the heat of the day just because they have to, because if they don’t they won’t even be able to get a drink of water.

And of all the people in the town of Sychar, the first person the Savior of the World wants to talk to is...*her*.

Is *this* what God is really like?

If *she* gets a second chance to get right with God... who else would be denied one? And *through her*, the people who didn’t want to have anything to do with her *also* get a second chance – to let go of their self-righteousness and meet the Savior!

This story is not usually listed as one of Jesus’ miracles, but perhaps it really is. This woman comes expecting nothing and finds – everything. This woman starts by saying she’s astonished to be asked for a drink by a Jew, although surely she’s been asked for a drink at the local watering hole before – it’s the oldest “pick-up line” in western history, for Moses himself met his future wife at a well. She’s used to men “hitting on her” with pick-up lines, this well-traveled woman, but not with follow-up lines like this man’s and knowledge of her life like this man’s, and an offer like this man’s: the water of eternal life.

So this woman *leaves her water jar* – probably her only one, and who’s going to sell her another one? – and breaks through the wall of taboo that separates her from her fellow villagers and runs to say “You have to meet this guy! He told me everything that I ever did. Could he be the Messiah, the Savior?” She has put down her baggage, literal and figurative, **and** the traditional role for even the most upright woman, and become a bearer not of water but of the biggest news the town of Sychar has ever had.

Jesus Christ is in town.

And he’s willing to talk to *anyone*.

Imagine the people listening to her excited tale and thinking, “If he told her everything she’s ever done, he must be the Messiah! No one could guess at her story.”

And they came – also liberated by her breaking of the taboo to listen to her, to come, to hear Jesus, and *then to come to faith themselves* that he “is truly the Savior of the World.”

Her life was never the same, nor was theirs.

She was the first evangelist, the first person to run and invite people to meet Jesus, the first to share how he welcomes all people and can transform them for good.

What taste Jesus has. Her? Yes. And Jesus Christ invites all of us, and all people, to know him even as he knows us, to be transformed by him for good, and to invite others to come to know him.

So, the next time you’re at your local watering hole, or water cooler, or coffee shop, ladies and men and children of St. Barnabas, will you be content to just carry your old baggage around [pick up flower pot “water jug”] or do you want to receive living

water from Jesus and a new job as well, sharing the Good News of Christ's liberating welcome to all sorts and conditions of people?

The old barriers of gender, status, religious sect, yes, and of sinfulness, are broken, and there is opportunity for new life for all. No one is beyond change. No one is beyond hope.

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