



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 8, 2026
EXODUS 17:1-7; PSALM 95; ROMANS 5:1-11; JOHN 4:5-42

LEAVE YOUR WATER JARS BEHIND

My name is Rich and I am an alcoholic. I had known that for a while before I said it aloud at an AA meeting in August of 2006. At that time, this was my deepest wound and the source of so much secrecy and shame for me. But now, 20 years later I see my addiction is a gift and an incredible source of God's grace in my life.

The Jesus we meet today is a rule-breaker and a truth-teller.

Jesus breaks all the rules to interact with the Samaritan woman at the well. The enmity between Jews and Samaritans was ancient, entrenched, and bitter. The two groups disagreed about everything that matters: how to honor God, how to interpret the Scriptures, and how and where to worship. Truth be told, they hated each other's guts.

Moreover, the Samaritan is a woman, and it is not customary or appropriate for Jesus — a Jewish man — to converse alone with

a Samaritan woman, much less to ask her for a drink of water. That sort of thing was just not done.

To put this in more contemporary language, the Samaritan woman is the Other. The alien. The heretic. The stranger. The foreigner. She represents all the boundaries that must not be transgressed in the religious life. All the spiritual taboos that must not be broken. But Jesus transgresses and breaks them all, anyway.

Who is the last person on earth you'd ever want to deem "good?" The last person you'd ask for a favor? Who might you meet at the well this morning? Donald Trump? Benjamin Netanyahu? An Iranian woman in a full burka hijab? Who are the people you secretly wish to convert, fix, impress, control, or save — but never accept as your equals in worth, dignity, or belovedness?

Jesus's willingness to break the social rules of his day means that we, his followers, must live into the truth that people are more than the sum of their parts. Jesus calls us to put aside the stereotypes we carry, the prejudices we nurse, the social and cultural lines we draw. He invites us to look at the Samaritan woman and see a sister and an apostle, not a harlot, a heretic, a foreigner, or a threat.

Where, in your life, might God be calling you to break a rule? To transgress a boundary? To embrace a stranger? What lines has Jesus crossed to find you, right where you are? Maybe there's a part of me that I don't want Jesus to see. A part of me that is hidden and shameful, a part that I hate so much that I would rather die than have it come to the light of day. Maybe Jesus wants to break all the rules to get at that. That's what my gayness and addiction were for me.

Then Jesus encounters the woman at the well and he speaks to her longer than any other person in the Gospels. They talk about theology and worship. Misogynistic interpretations of the story suggest that the woman is a sinner, but the text never says that. We don't know why she had five husbands. Marriage was an economic arrangement between families. Very young girls were given in marriage to older men for the economic benefit of their families. Families could also force their children to divorce and remarry if a better deal came along. Having several marriages

wasn't uncommon since males were often older and frequently died from illness, war, or injury. Women were traded like property and had little say in the matter. Perhaps the Samaritan woman was married off as a child bride, then widowed and passed along among her dead husband's brothers, as per the "Levirate marriage" practice of the day. Maybe her various husbands abandon her because she's infertile. Maybe she's a victim of abuse. We just don't know. But we can infer that she comes to gather water at noon to avoid the women of the village who fetch water in the cool of the morning. We can safely conclude that she doesn't want to be seen probably because she's wounded.

So, she and Jesus talk about theology, and he offers her living water that gushes up to eternal life. Then she asks for this living water, and he asks about her husband. What? Jesus wasn't avoiding the subject; he was touching the wound and suggesting a remedy.

You want to stop trying to quench your thirst with things that will never satisfy? If you want this eternal life, then it starts with being seen. It starts with the truth — the naked truth about your original wound and your original beauty and every good and bad thing about you. You have heard it said that water finds its lowest point — well, living water finds your lowest point.ⁱ

The Living water offered by Jesus Christ finds your lowest point. It flows to your

original wound. The thing that you spend so much energy trying to heal through all the insufficient ways — addiction, relationships, success, graduate degrees, money, trying to get your parents to love you more. There are a million ways we try to use substitutes for God to try and make sure our damage is not seen.

My friend, theologian James Alison, describes faith not as intellectually assenting to a set of theological propositions, but he describes faith as relaxing.ⁱⁱ Relaxing in the love and presence of God in the way we relax in the presence of someone we are certain is fond of us. When we are in the presence of someone that we know loves us, we are funnier, more spontaneous, softer and less defended. Alison says faith is relaxing. I think this is what happened to the woman at the well. I think living water found a crack in her defenses and trickled down to her lowest point, her deepest wound, her greatest need, and she finally exhaled. In fact, she relaxed so much she left her water jar at the well.

I've always seen her water jar as a metaphor for what we think will quench

our thirst but never does. I still have some water jars that I need to leave behind. Things I think will make me whole, hide my wound, make me more loveable — I need to leave those jars at the well.

Because being known and loved and forgiven in our true form by our incredible God can quench our spiritual thirst in a way that no amount of success or admiration or romantic love ever can. This is God's economy of love — that our greatest wound, our deepest shame, our greatest sin, is also our greatest gift and our greatest teacher. I thank God today that I am a gay alcoholic in recovery.

This is how seen we are by God, my friends: that whatever that lowest point of you is, whatever the deepest wound, the vilest sin, the most damaged thing in you is, the living water of Christ's compassion can find it, will find it, has found it.

So, in these remaining weeks of Lent, break a rule, relax into God, let the living water touch your deepest wound, and leave your water jars behind.

John 4:5-42 [*Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with*

his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him. Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."]

ⁱ I am grateful to The Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber for this insight.

ⁱⁱ James Alison. Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay. London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2001.