

“Enough”

Sermon by Rev. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

March 19, 2016

Scriptures: Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:5-42

We could suppose we know a lot about the woman Jesus meets at the well. There are a few facts that we could use to make some assumptions:

- 1) She has had 5 husbands, and the man she lives with now is not her husband
- 2) She is a Samaritan woman
- 3) She is going to the well at the hottest point of the day, when no one else is around.

Historically, preachers and biblical scholars have had a fun time with this woman, whom the Eastern Orthodox Church has named Photini, which means “The Enlightened One.” I like it that Eastern Christians gave her a name. But interpreters of scripture have also painted one story about this woman, characterizing her as the first century version of a nasty woman: a social outcast, a whore, a woman even her own despised tribe does not want around. Conservative preacher and seminary president John Piper in a sermon called her “a worldly, sensually-minded harlot from Samaria.”¹

It can be easy to take initial observations and then believe we know the whole story about somebody. Nigerian feminist writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gives a TED Talk called “The Danger of a Single Story”² and tells of growing up in her middle class Nigerian life. Because her father was a professor and her mother an administrator, they could afford to have a

¹ John Piper, “God Seeks People to Worship Him in Spirit and Truth” Piper is a Calvinist Baptist preacher and scholar in Minneapolis, MN.

² Kathryn Matthews also refers to this TED Talk in her commentary on this passage of scripture

house boy, Fide, as domestic help. Adichie understood Fide was poor, and her family would send him home with extra yams and used clothes they no longer needed. Adichie's mother would tell her when she didn't finish her dinner, "Finish your food! Don't you know? People like Fide's family have nothing!" So, Adichie only knew Fide as poor, and her primary feeling for him was pity. One day, she went to Fide's village for a visit. Fide's mother showed Adichie a beautiful basket of dyed raffia his brother had made. Adichie found herself shocked; all she had ever heard about Fide and his family were how poor they were; she had never considered that they could make something beautiful, for she could only think of them as being poor.

Later, when she went to university in the United States, she had an American roommate who was shocked by her. When her roommate asked her how she came to know English so well, the roommate was confused when Adichie said that English is the official language of Nigeria. When the roommate asked to hear some of Adichie's favorite music, and Adichie pulled out her Mariah Carey CD instead of "tribal music," the roommate was very disappointed.

Adichie saw that just as she only made room for one story about the poor house boy Fide, her roommate had only made one story for her.

So, instead of deciding based on a few words that we know the Samaritan woman's story, let us consider that she is a woman more complex than the initial details of the gospel may lead us to assume. While some commentators assumed her to be a nasty woman, we can guess there is probably more to her story. If we look to the well where the Samaritan woman seeks her water, we see reflections of an earlier story. The well from which the woman draws water is Jacob's well. We know that Jacob was a grandson of Abraham in Genesis. We know that Jacob received a new name, Israel, which means "struggles with God." And we know that Jacob first met the woman he wished to marry, Rachel, at this well. Like the Samaritan woman, Jacob had not married just once. He married

Rachel's sister Leah first, because Leah was older and the sisters' dad required that the elder sister marry first. (I have always held a special place in my heart for the less favored sister Leah). Jacob then married Rachel. And though they were not married, Jacob also had intimate relations and conceived children with Zilpah and Bilhah, the maids to Leah and Rachel.

Because Jesus was a Jew, and because Jacob was pretty central to the Jewish story, I imagine when Jesus approached the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, he saw the layered footsteps of Jacob and his wives and concubines in the ancient dirt at his feet. While talking to the Samaritan woman about water, Jesus saw the water well where Jacob first encountered Rachel; he saw the Jabbok River, next to which Jacob wrestled with God and was given his new name Israel. Jesus may have seen the well and have been reminded of Moses striking a rock in a barren desert and, by God's power, creating a stream of water for a very thirsty people. Knowing that Jacob became Israel, and was the patriarch through whom the Hebrews' relationship with God continued, perhaps Jesus saw in this Samaritan woman someone who would be a carrier-- not of water, but of the continuing story of God's relationship with us, as known through Jesus.

The idea of living water, water that will keep us from ever being thirsty again, water that will become in you and in me a spring of water gushing up to eternal life, disrupts the idea that water can only be found at a specific source; this water Jesus promises is continuous, plentiful, and follows you always. Similarly, the Samaritan woman asks Jesus about the proper site for the worship of God, mentioning that her ancestors worshipped on "this mountain." She meant the mountain of Gerazim, which was where the Samaritans practiced the worship of God. The Jewish center of worship, however, was at the Jerusalem Temple. For generations a religious rift existed between the two groups, exemplified by their different worship sites. With one phrase, Jesus predicts the day when the worship of God

will not be based in either site; but the worship of God will happen in “spirit and truth.”

Just as Jesus took something specific and local-- Jacob’s well-- and made it something that can be accessed anywhere, Jesus also took the specific and local sites of worship-- Mount Gerazim and the Jerusalem Temple-- and pointed the way to a God who can be accessed anywhere there is “spirit and truth.”

Through the Samaritan woman, Jesus moves us from looking at God and blessing as something scarce and only accessible in certain spaces, by certain people, to envisioning both God and blessing that can be abundant and everywhere. The first sign of God’s abundance was the care with which Jesus engaged the Samaritan woman’s story. He approaches her without judgment; even though he points out that she has had 5 husbands, there is nothing Jesus says that would shame her for history. Jesus may have seen all these echoing stories, and yet the Samaritan woman left knowing that Jesus truly saw *her*. She experienced Jesus caring about *her* story. With every bit of conversation Jesus offered this woman, she came right back at him, persistent, seeking more. “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” She looks to Jesus and yearns for something more, and what he can promise her is enough. Enough water-- to the point that she leaves her water jug behind her and runs to the city to tell others what she has discovered in Jesus. Enough of God’s love, which is abundant enough that it can be for both Samaritans and Jews, and for people who worship in this sanctuary and for people who worship in the mosque on the other side of Overpeck.

God’s abundance is good news for thirsty people. I am very proud that our Session approved at its last meeting a recovery group for alcoholics who also happen to be law enforcement agents. It will be called Badges and Bottles. In the current issue of *The Christian Century*, I discovered an interview with Adam Platinga, a cop who has served in Milwaukee and San

Francisco, who also happens to be a preacher's kid. Platinga describes the 90-10 rule in law enforcement: "90 percent of people are decent, 10 percent aren't, and as a cop you deal with that 10 percent 90 percent of the time." Encountering people at their most hopeless, in some of life's most toxic situations, certainly can shape one's view of humanity. Many cops who entered law enforcement with a hopeful idealism find an erosion of trust in humanity, struggle with compassion fatigue, and have trouble letting their guard down when their guard is what protects them on the job. It is understandable why some cops become thirsty people and look to alcohol to quench a thirst that is much deeper. A recovery group that offers truth-telling, grace and guidance may become a source of living water in their lives.

For most of us, the stories of who we are will not fit neatly into one box. Along with the stories of our layered identities come the echoed stories of those who came before us in whose footsteps we now walk. And then, there are the stories of our thirst. We thirst for connection. We thirst for validation. We thirst for healing-- in our own lives and in the world in which we live. May we turn to Jesus in our thirst, and find in that living water a holy abundance, that is enough. Amen.