

**My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

**Back in the early '90s my nephew received a Master's Degree from Harvard University. I was fortunate enough to be able to attend the commencement exercises. One of the traditions of the school is for the graduates to gather at Memorial Church to hear the chaplain offer words of solace and encouragement as they leave "the Yard" to take their places in the world.**

**The Rev. Dr. Peter Gomes, then Chaplain at Harvard and the author of several books on Sacred Scripture, had given the benediction at Ronald Reagan's second Inauguration, and preached on the occasion of his successor, George Bush's, Inauguration at the National Cathedral, delivered this unvarnished truth to the graduates. Afterwards, I asked him for a copy of his message. In his stentorian ringing tones, that sounded like a cross between a Shakespearean actor and the TV character FRASIER, Dr. Gomes took no prisoners as he began:**

**You are going to be sent out of here for good, and most of you aren't ready to go. The president is about to bid you into the fellowship of educated men and women and (here he paused and spoke each word slowly and emphatically) you-know-just-how-dumb-you-really-are. (Here the graduates all actually cheered!)**

**And worse than that, the world, and your parents in particular, are going to expect that you will be among the brightest and the best. But you know that you can no longer fool all the people even some of the time. By noontime today, you will be out of here. By tomorrow you will be history. By Saturday, you will be toast. That's a fact—no exceptions, no extensions."**

**Nevertheless, there is reason to hope, Dr. Gomes promised. The future is God's gift to you. God will not let you stumble or fall. God has not brought you this far to this place to abandon you or leave you here alone and afraid. The God of Israel, The God of the Christ, Allah of Islam never stumbles, never sleeps, never goes on sabbatical. Thus, my beloved and bewildered young friends do not be afraid.**

**What Rev. Dr. Gomes did for that graduating class at Harvard, Jesus does for the woman at the well.**

**Before we take a look at this encounter, it's fascinating that even today the town of Sychar in Samaria still exists. It is a place the passage of time seems to have forgotten. Only about 300 people still live there and they still consider themselves Samaritans. The primary structure in town is a kind of cellar, which houses a well, the only source of water for miles around. Archeologists estimate the date upwards of 4,000 years. Weary travelers have quenched their thirst there since the time of Jacob. But even more fascinating is the fact that this place historically validates for us the precise location where the Samaritan woman**

had this encounter with Jesus. It's authenticity is undisputed. Samaritans, Muslims, Christians, and Jews all agree that this is the place where the story took place.

It was about noon that day. Jesus and his companions had probably been traveling by foot across the dusty, barren landscape of the desert. He was tired. He said he would wait at the well, outside the town of Sychar, while they went to buy food. The Samaritan woman approaches to draw water from the well. Jesus speaks to her, "Give me a drink".

The woman is shocked! First of all, in that culture, in that time, and even today, a man never directly addressed an unrelated woman. It was unheard of. Secondly, Jews considered Samaritans as the lowest form of humanity. They considered them unclean—ritualistically speaking, but probably in terms of personal hygiene as well. Jesus had crossed both a gender and a racial line by even speaking to this person. She replies, "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman for a drink?"

Notice how Jesus ignores her question. He ignores the gender inequality. He ignores the racial disparity. He gets right to the point: "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

The woman doesn't seem to have a clue as to what he is saying. She seems to mock him, saying something like, "Come on, Man, you don't even have a bucket. Where are you going to get your living water. What, do you think you're better than our father, Jacob? (Here we see that both Jew and Samaritan considered Jacob their father in faith).

Jesus ignores her sarcasm and goes on, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Now, remember this woman had to come to this well every day when the sun was high at noon. She came so late because the other women who came in the cool of the morning would have nothing to do with her. They probably scorned her and mocked her and mistreated her. So, hot and weary herself, she says, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

In a sudden change of direction, Jesus startles the woman and tells her to go get her husband. In her shock, she blurts out the dark truth about herself, "I do not have a husband". She's totally honest. She doesn't try to hide her shame. She owns up to her own miserable behavior that has led to a miserable life and that is the first step in finding living water for a thirsty soul. We must give an honest confession about our lives. Jesus acknowledges her honesty, "You are right in saying, 'I do not have a husband', for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you say is true."

**Do you notice that Jesus doesn't shake his finger in her face or tell her how rotten a person she is, rather he praises her for telling the truth. I really wish we could better get that message across in the church. The purpose of religion is not to dwell on the bad in people, but to honor the good. Our work is to elevate people, not pull them down. It really bothers me that we don't always do a good job of that in the church.**

**Can you imagine how that woman was treated by others in the town. The men looked down on her or, even worse, saw her as an object of their lust. The women cursed her, belittled her, and said all kinds of shameful things about her. The children, taking their lead from their parents, as they always do, probably even called her all kinds of evil names and, maybe, even threw stones at her. How terrible must have been her own self-image? She probably never even set foot in the synagogue, believing that even God would strike her down.**

**Now, the woman starts to squirm. Jesus has gotten inside all her defenses. So, she decides to change the subject. We do that a lot, don't we? If the conversation gets a little uncomfortable, especially about ourselves, we deflect the conversation to the other person or to something he or she may find interesting. So, the woman says, "Sir, I can see that you are a prophet..." so let's talk about religion. We worship here, you worship in Jerusalem...so, who's right?**

**Jesus says, "Oh, no, I'm not going to play this game. Religion isn't about where you worship or how you worship. That doesn't matter. What matters is what's in your heart. "God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth."**

**This statement seems to cause a light to go on in the Samaritan woman. She's moved to say, "I know that the Messiah is coming, the one called the Christ, when he comes, he will tell us everything."**

**Jesus sees the Spirit come alive in this woman who has spoken truth to him. It moves him for the first time to reveal the great messianic secret. This is one of the most dramatic moments in Biblical history. Jesus lets his true identity be known. He simply says, "I am he, the one speaking to you."**

**Think about it! He doesn't reveal his identity to the Sanhedrin or the High Priests. He doesn't make this pronouncement in the Temple or a synagogue. Even when he showed himself in all his glory to his best friends, Peter, James, and John on the mountain, they scarcely understood, and he told them to tell no one. No! This moment that history has been waiting for—the hopes and fears of all people of all time, Jesus reveals first to this nobody, this Samaritan, this person his own people consider the lowest form of humanity, this woman, this outcast among a people of outcasts. Why?**

**I'm not sure. But it makes me think of the Lord's prayer in the 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Matthew: "I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, you have revealed them to the little ones".**

**Now, the disciples come back. They're stunned to see Jesus talking to this woman, but they say nothing. Even big mouth Peter who seems to have had an opinion on everything is stunned into silence. But Jesus just has to look at them to see their disapproval. Their lips may have been silent, but the looks they gave him, their faces said it all. They were shocked, confused, maybe disappointed, maybe even ashamed for him. They could see what kind of woman she was.**

**But what about the woman? She takes off, even leaving her water jar behind, racing into the town. She forgets about her shame. She's on fire with a new truth, the greatest truth. She may be a nobody, but she has to tell anybody about somebody who has the power to save everybody. This is the second step in finding living water for a thirsty soul. She recognized and accepted Jesus as the Messiah.**

**Once you do that. Once you know for yourself that you have a Savior and his name is Jesus, it very quickly leads to the third step in finding living water for a thirsty soul. You have to tell the story. Once the love of God fills your soul to overflowing, you can't help but share it.**

**The Samaritan woman lost the shame of her sin. She came to the well alone, almost in secrecy. Now she returns in congregation. She first came to the well as one disgraced, she now returns as one graced. This Samaritan woman becomes the first evangelist. Many came to believe in Jesus because of her testimony, and, in the end, they tell her, "We no longer believe in him because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world."**

**We might ask ourselves today, have we taken the first step in finding the living water for our thirsty souls by letting go of our shame and confessing our sins? Have we truly taken the second step in finding water for our thirsty souls by recognizing and accepting Jesus as the Messiah, that is, welcoming Him as Lord of our lives. Are we ready to take the third step in finding water for our thirsty souls by telling anybody about somebody who has the power to save everybody? Or are we still thirsting as we wallow in the sinful conditions of our lives, unwilling to put Christ first, and satisfied in keeping whatever grace we have received to ourselves? May these days of Lent lead us to find the living water for our thirsty souls.**