



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

UPSIDE DOWN AND INSIDE OUT

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Christianity

John 4.1-42 (abbreviated)

A Samaritan woman came to draw water at noon, 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet" ... Jesus said to her, "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship God in spirit and truth."

When the disciples returned, they were astonished that Jesus 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. Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, and they asked him to stay with them. He stayed with them for two days.

Hinduism

Bhagavad Gita 9.29

I look upon all creatures equally; none are less dear to me and none more dear.

He was a high school sophomore wishing that the floor would open up and swallow him as he digs his tennis shoes into the rug. The assistant principal was on the phone talking to his mother about his being caught cheating on an exam. As much as he tries to convince himself otherwise, he knows that this is going to be a big deal to his parents, and to himself. He's really messed up this time.

She started going to church when everything else started falling apart. She always slips in late, after the greeting time so she won't have to shake hands or look anyone else in the eye. She sits in the back

row and leaves before anyone can speak to her afterwards. Depression, problems at work, failed relationships have plagued her all her life. She thinks she has more problems than anyone she knows.

He has been going to church all his life and has always been a good person. He never let his parents down, he always succeeded at whatever he tried, he never went through any teenage rebellion nor did he have any midlife crises. He never did drugs, got in any scrapes with the law, and was considered quite successful as a businessman. By society's standards, he is pretty well put together. But deep inside he harbors grudges; he judges others who are different from himself; he looks down on people without any good reason.

She goes to the well when no one else is there. The other women go in the cool of the morning or the early evening, and they talk and laugh as they gather water for their families. She tried that, but they taunted her for being a loose woman. So she has learned to go to the well at noon. It is unbearably hot then, but at least there is no one else there to point fingers at her. On this particular day, as she straightens up from the heavy yoke with the two buckets that have bent her over, she sees a man sitting at the well. He seems to be waiting for her; she considers running but she knows he can catch her if he wants to. She curses under her breath and tries to avoid him.

But the man speaks to her and when she looks at him eye to eye she sees his olive skin and dark eyes. He is a Jew. What the hell is he doing here? Has he lost his way? The Jews have rules about what they can eat and drink, and if he drinks water from a Samaritan well he'll be breaking the law. But he asks her for water anyway. He talks to her as though she matters, as if her being there in the hottest part of the day is not out of the ordinary. This is too weird. It seems surrealistic, mirage-like in the hot summer heat.

“Could I have a drink of water?” sounded like a simple request, but it seems impertinent to her. How could this Jew ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman? Our people have been enemies for centuries. They despise us; we despise them. While we have the same God we have different ideas about religion. How is it that he, who lives in a respectable neighborhood on the other side of the tracks, should ask a drink of me who lives in subsidized housing? How is it that this seemingly respectable man wants to talk to a woman of questionable repute? What's he up to? His pick-up line is a little odd: Could I have a drink of water? Is he making fun of her?

They talk for quite a while though they are not on the same wavelength. In fact, Jesus talks to this woman longer than he talks to anyone else in the gospels—longer than he talks to any of his disciples, any of his accusers, or anyone in his family. She is a surprising choice for a long conversation because she is an outsider—a Samaritan—a half-breed, full-blooded pagan as far as Jews are concerned. She is also a woman, and women are not allowed to talk to men in public, men whose daily prayer includes “I thank you, God, that I am not a woman.” Not only is she a woman, she is a woman with a reputation that in her younger days, as Brett Younger comments, would make Lady Gaga look like the poster girl for the “True Love Waits” campaign.

He asks for water as a decoy, to confuse her, to turn her world upside down, inside out. It works. She questions his request, which is exactly what he wants her to do so he can talk about living water, spiritual refreshment, a soul-cleansing shower. But she doesn't understand. She takes him literally; living water is fresh water that comes from a spring or a river. How can he promise that? All that is here is the stagnant water of this cistern well. Why is he teasing her like this? She would like some of his ‘magic water’ so she could stay home and hide behind her pretenses and not have to face anyone any more. But is this guy a magician?

Jesus raises the stakes by asking her about her husband. “That seems a little personal,” she thought; “I thought we were talking about religion.” She could lie, but somehow she gets the idea that he would know it was a lie. She looks him in the eye and says boldly that she doesn’t have a husband. And with that opening, he walks through the door of her life to tell her the rest of the truth about herself. If he knows about all the men she’s had, what else must he know about her? But she senses that he’s not judging her or condemning her, just letting her know that water for parched souls isn’t dependent on her lifestyle.

This man is different from other men she’s known. Instead of taking advantage of her, he excites her in a new way. The woman runs back to tell her friends and family, and the whole village, what has happened. There is a fountain of living water springing up inside her. She’s found a new confidence that transcends her secrets; she doesn’t need to hide from the women—or the men—any more; she tells them all. She’s free of her hidden past. Her world has been turned inside out. She forgets her water jar, leaving it at the well because that isn’t the most important thing right now.

We all have something in common with this Samaritan woman. There is an outsider inside all of us. We are not what we wish we were at times and not always what we should be. There are dark sides to our thoughts and prejudices in our actions. We say things we shouldn’t and don’t say things we should; we hurt the people we love the most and ignore the people that everyone else ignores because they’re too difficult to love. We want a better world but we don’t want to contribute to it. The magic waters of a false religion just don’t make sense any more.

Like her, we lug around heavy jars day after day in the hot sun of despair, hoping to find a few drops of water in the well of hope, just enough to get us through the worst. Our jars are weighed down with stagnant water of “should haves” and the “ought tos” and the “never wills” of our lives. They are the times we let the people we love down, the times we let ourselves down; they are the insecurities, the apathy, the fears, we keep hidden. They are the jars of prejudice and hatred; the water that drowns us in our uncertainties rather than refreshing us in hope.

Shirley Chisholm, the first African-American woman elected to Congress, made a bid for the presidency in 1972, the year a racist, George Wallace, also ran and the year in which he was shot at point-blank range during a campaign appearance. Chisholm visited Wallace in the hospital to express her concern and sympathy, a gesture which attracted widespread media attention, puzzling those who had followed Wallace’s career as one of the most vitriolic segregationists of his day. Chisholm wanted to convey, in part, her belief that it was important in a democracy to respect contrary opinions without “impugning the motives” and “maligning the character” of one’s opponents. To view it any other way, Chisholm argued, was to encourage “the same sickness in public life that leads to assassinations.” (*The Atlantic*, October 2016). What kind of world might we dream of if all politicians, public servants, practitioners of religion offered this kind of living water?

We are the woman at the well as well as the one who offers the water of wholeness. We feel the spark that wells up within her when she begins to live in the daylight of grace. We glimpse the joy of tapping into the refreshing water of peace which we can offer parched souls who need to know they are loved regardless of their past, their reputation, their worries, or their pain. Gratefully we come to proclaim that the waters of God’s grace are here for anyone who needs a drink. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

(Adapted from Brett Younger’s sermon “Living Water” in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Volume XXII, Number 2)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, whose purpose and whose laws pervade this vast universe, and make of it one world, we come to center ourselves in your loving presence. All too often, when we look at the moon, we forget that people all over our world look at the same moon; those in Russia, in Syria, in Chile, and Argentina are unified in our inspiration from celestial light. When we see stars overhead on a cloudless night, it reminds us of the vastness of our universe, and the multiverse beyond our own universe, and we give thanks.

Today as we strive to live faithfully in this world, we pray you grant us a sense of purposefulness and forgive us for our aimless living, the scattered devotion of our lives to things that matter little. Help us discover a purpose in life so worth the soul's dedication to all our existence will be drawn together around a central loyalty.

Give us wisdom and discernment, Eternal Spirit, that during these difficult days of political turmoil that we will exercise well the privilege we have of electing leaders who will make this world more a place of harmony. We cringe at politicians and religious leaders who promote hatred and bigotry, who condone violence and prejudice by publicly spewing forth vitriol day after day. May we be wise in voting, not by party line or according to what would benefit us personally, but for those who will best provide for the welfare of all in our society and around the world.

For the many who have been the victims of terrorist violence, bombings and shootings these past weeks, we ask for your healing--physically, spiritually, emotionally. We condemn such ways of settling differences, and yet we feel so helpless to prevent them. Keep us ever loyal to your call to bring peace and wholeness even when it feels so hopeless.

Grant us your presence this day that we may see you in each person we meet, in each phenomenon of nature we explore, offering a drink of fresh water to those whose lives seem most parched and weighed down with cares and worries. Send us out with your grace to be your servants of love and peace wherever we go. In the name of the one who calls us, even Jesus the Christ, Amen.