

I lived in Belgium for a year in another life and ended up having a lot of time alone which I sometime filled with going to the movies - usually American movies with Dutch subtitles. I remember a particular scene in the Mel Brooks movie, *To Be or Not To Be*. In it a Nazi officer sits on the edge of his desk offering the Mel Brooks character a piece of candy from a box saying, New Guts? Mel Brooks character looking shocked and disgusted quickly withdraws his hand. I was the only one in the crowded theatre who laughed. It was the kind of thing that doesn't hold its meaning beyond its culture and in its translation.

There is a lot of that going on in today's scripture that carries meaning we just skim right over or interpret from a 21st century point of view. Without the cultural knowledge, we lose a lot of the story. Without understanding the mispronunciation of nougats you totally miss the joke.

So there are a lot of those cultural clues we wouldn't get on just reading this. The first is the setting - a well - where something significant was sure to happen. Hearing the location, the listeners immediately prick up their ears.

The second is that Jesus encounters this woman at noon. Women of the household generally fetched the water every day. First thing in the morning the well was humming like its successor the water cooler. By noon though, most people are seeking shade from the brutal sun. Only an outcast would choose midday to approach the well. She must have been surprised to find Jesus there at that hour.

And, she is a Samaritan Woman - not surprising since they are in Samaria - not surprising, but repugnant. Since our most common connection with Samaritans is the Good Samaritan and because we've chosen to name lots of social service organizations after him; we don't immediately think, "Ughh a Samaritan - ick" even when it's explained to us. But Jesus' contemporaries would envision someone slightly less than human - not quite the undead but close. This isn't just an interesting cultural fact; it is a statement about Jesus, and thereby a statement about God. Jesus engages with a Samaritan. Jesus drinks from a Samaritan's cup.

The woman is astounded that Jesus would drink from her cup. And her astonishment rises when Jesus talks about other water, Living Water which satisfies a thirst deeper than one arising from the midday heat. Like so many others, she doesn't immediately understand that the Living Water is

Spiritual. So Jesus sets the scene to show her. "Go and call your Husband." he says.

Here's another place where our 21st century understanding leads us astray. Yes, this woman has had 5 husbands and is currently living with a man outside of marriage. But where we might conclude that here is a woman of no morals, a woman who is promiscuous sexually, 1st century folk would know that here is someone who has been badly treated - probably abandoned time and again by a man who was meant to be her protector. Yes, she is an outcast but more because of her scars than because of her sins. She has undoubtedly had to fend for herself, she has probably done some things she is not proud of, things that she has allowed to define her, to brand her. And Jesus knows them all - knows everything I have ever done, as she tells it.

Ahhh at last, she is known; without confession, without groveling, without fear or even shame, she is known. She has taken in Living Water - the ache of loneliness, of shame, the isolation of being a pariah - her thirst for connection, for wholeness, this thirst has been slaked.

There is so much each of us carries, tightly held, inside - secrets not sins, fears of inadequacy, remembered slights, painful nicknames, minor maybe even major failures. Some of us are more afraid that our thoughts will be known than our deeds. What relief, what lightness, what freedom to be in the presence of someone who knows everything you've ever done. To be fully known; and to be fully loved. That is the Living Water - water that runs through us and leaves behind the parts of us we want to disavow - like gold nuggets in a prospector's sifter after the mud has been washed away - our secrets sit there for all to see, for Jesus to see. That is the living Gospel - the dying to a self covered with the mud of fear and coming alive in the bright light and clear water of Christ's love.

I know that I have had that experience where I hold on tightly to the parts of myself I don't feel good about. And the more I try to pretend they aren't there, the more unworthy I feel, and the further I feel from God - praying with 2/3s of myself, hiding the other third. When a time comes that I can not carry this burden alone anymore and finally turn my whole self to God - I discover that the only one I was hiding from was me. God knew the whole of me all the time.

The Samaritan Woman shed her heavy burden in that encounter. She saw herself through different eyes, through Jesus' eyes. So, drenched in living water she rushes off to tell those in the village who she has encountered - can this be the messiah? Her remarkable tale moves many to go to the

Well and see for themselves, to experience Living Water for themselves. I find it wonderful that she rushes off to tell the whole village of her experience, to urge them to share it; not letting her former self hold her back.

That is, perhaps, a characteristic of her having been an outcast: that once she finds a safe harbor she wants to offer it to others. And, that is the characteristic of Living Water. Living Water cannot be contained, it must be shared. And, she shares her experience with such passion and enthusiasm that she is no longer an outcast on the margins. She is transformed and the difference is obvious for all to see and hear. It gives me such joy to envision our Samaritan woman and how her place in the village changed. How on the following days she would gather at the well in the morning - drawing up drinking water, and giving out Living Water.

In the 3 chapter of John, the one right before this text, Jesus speaks a sentence that many believe encapsulates the gospel: **16** "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." And as if to demonstrate what God meant by "the world" - he heads for Samaria and this well and this woman. Do we even realize what a remarkable thing this woman did - she evangelized the Samaritan world. She broke a barrier because she could not stop herself.