

## **“The Woman At The Well: Letting It Go To Take It Up”**

Date: January 5th, 2020 Epiphany Sunday

Text: John 4: 7 - 30

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Back in my youth I was an avid backpacker. By the time I was 18 I had walked ¾'s of the Bruce Trail in Ontario. In my 20's I graduated to the rugged trails of the West Coast and the Rockies. Beautiful trips, to be sure, but also endurance efforts since you carried everything you needed on your back for four or five days or more. It was quite a burden at times, especially over tough terrain. Many times I wished I could just put the pack down and leave it behind – how much nicer the trip would be. But what would I do at lunch time, or bedtime, or if it rained? My desire would be to travel light, but the burden was inevitable. There was no way to make the journey without the weight.

Life can seem like this. We bear the weight of many things which can seem like oppressive burdens. You can even see it in a person sometimes. A person who is by nature upbeat can be overwhelmed by something in life, that takes the spring out of their step...makes the smile come more slowly...that can even bow over their back some. They just look like they are shouldering some weight.

Many things can burden us. Paralyzing guilt in a relationship which leaves our burnt bridges forever destroyed. Immobilizing fear which prevents us from stepping forward into something new and necessary. Enduring grief, which feels like being stuck in a deep dark pit. Suffocating victimhood, which can leave us feeling bound and gagged with no escape. An overwhelming sense of responsibility – as if someone has put a pack on you and just continues to load it up with more and more stuff. With so many people walking around shouldering these kinds of burdens, it is no wonder we see around us in our lives people who have been broken by the strain. Or, perhaps as Henry David Thoreau put it, many people live lives of quiet desperation.

The story of the woman at the well is a story about a woman with a burden. As the conversation begins we don't know what that burden is. All we see is Jesus doing something natural: simply asking for some water. Actually, Jesus' request wasn't that natural at all, in his day. John gave a little technical aside to help the reader in verse 9: “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans”. For over 400 years there had been a growing antagonism between the Jews of Judea (the people of the old southern Kingdom of Judah) and those who developed a different kind of Jewish faith to the north in what had been the northern Kingdom of Israel.

Jesus crossed a taboo boundary in talking with a Samaritan. AND he was talking to a woman in public, another social taboo. The woman was taken aback, and naturally asked “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (vs 9). Despite these taboos, Jesus went on to offer her “living water” that in the taking would mean she “would never again be thirsty”. “The water that I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (vs. 14). This is an act of grace. Grace is about caring for someone you’re not obliged to help. Grace is about reaching past the barriers and taboos to help. Grace is about giving something to someone even though its not their right, or they haven’t earned it. Grace is about giving even at personal cost. [pause] Grace is the active expression of God’s love, given abundantly, selflessly, joyously. Jesus said in grace God extends love to us like a parent does to one’s child.

Think about a mother’s love for her child. Love is not given in response to what a baby gives the mom – frankly, knowing some of the things I have been given by babies (sleepless nights, messes on my shoulder, dirty diapers, little yellow showers) giving love back for what I’ve received has sometimes been the last thing on my mind. A mother loves her baby, in the end, because the infant is her baby. She bore this life into the world, and in that act of creation love springs forth. God graces us in a similar way: through the simple gift of our existence, the opportunity to know and experience this world, the capacity we have for love and relationships... in the tug of God’s yearning to be known by us, God’s open acceptance of us, God’s desire to be intimate with us, God’s offer to help us. That’s grace. And it comes to us like “living water”: cool and refreshing, renewing and life sustaining.

“Sir, give me this water” the woman asked of Jesus. She wanted this gift. But here, in the twist of the story, we discover how significant the gift is, but perhaps not as we might first assume. We learn that Jesus knew her history of having five husbands. From our context we might assume she was a serial divorcee, and now—in this moment—she was living with a man who was not her husband. If we start with this assumption then we peg the woman for being a sinner...by any one’s standards. But that is not likely the case. In that day it was very hard and exceedingly rare for a woman to arrange for a divorce. So if she had run through 5 husbands that meant those men either divorced her or died..each time putting her life in jeopardy. The repeating cycles of marriage followed by death or divorce threw her into successive periods of poverty. Rather than be a sinner, she was a victim. Every time—with every marriage—life got better, and then she was knocked down again. That was the weight she carried. No wonder she asked for this “living water”.

But here the story becomes unclear. Jesus offered this living water and she asked to receive it, but we don’t hear of a moment when the gift is given. The woman was perhaps not clear about what Jesus was offering her, as she said, “give me this water, so I won’t have to keep coming back to this well.” Before things were clarified she was frightened off by the arrival of the disciples, interrupting the story just as it got to its climax! And then she seemed uncertain about who Jesus really was: “He can’t be the Messiah,

can he?" I think it is a good guess to imagine that the whole incident left her with some mighty big questions: "Who was that man?" "What was I really being offered?" "What does this mean for me?" I think a gracious gift offered do raise these kinds of questions in any of us.

Grace can be confusing. Have you ever received an unexpected Christmas gift from a person you had not planned to give a gift to yourself? How do you feel? That situation can make us feel embarrassed and obligated to do something in return. We don't like the unbalanced feeling of only receiving...and the urge to right the balance can drive us to the mall to face the crowds on Christmas Eve. But that's better than not giving that person a gift in turn! Receiving a gracious gift can be hard. But sometimes a gift is just a gift, and knowing that...and receiving it as just that...can make the gift special, the moment special, the giver special. Can help you feel special. So it is with God's grace.

Receiving grace can also spark uncertainty. It did with this woman. She hurried back home to tell the villagers what had just happened, and she asked, "He can't be the Messiah, can he?" (vs. 29). We can wonder—even worry—about how a gift of grace might change a relationship. Have you ever heard of a person who was in real need refusing sincere help from another person? I'm sure most of us have—I know I've done this myself! Perhaps in some instances it is pride that makes a person say "no", but I think often such people refuse because they figure receiving the gift will change the relationship and they are simply not willing to live with that possibility.

But in our story neither of these things were in Jesus' mind. There was no implied awkwardness. He wasn't expecting something in return. Jesus was just offering a gift to a woman, a victim, who had suffered multiple periods of poverty. An act of grace: something offered to help her deal with the issues she faced in life. It didn't depend on her saying, instantly, "yes!". God's grace is there always for us. God's hand is always extended to us. But we have to be able to accept it. And this story leaves us hanging because we really never find out for sure that she did.

Imagine that you are walking down the road carrying a heavy load in both your arms. It's a load you must carry. So you proceed on your journey, despite the burden, plodding along under its weight. And someone comes along to offer you a cold glass of water – an act of grace which you need. But to take the cup you need a free hand. You can't take that water unless you lay your load down. Then, with that rest, with that refreshment, with that help, the burden if still there will seem a little lighter.

This is the story's message, I think. God offers that cup. It contains living water gushing up into new life. What is the form of that new life? Certainly there is the obvious. It can change our understanding of the

giver (like the woman asked, “Maybe he is the Messiah?”). It surely does prompt feelings of gratitude. But I think receiving a gift of grace can change us as well—change how we understand ourselves. We call this kind of change in understanding an “epiphany.” The woman at the well might say “I’m not just the victim of repeated poverty. Someone cares for me! Someone thinks I am worth helping. That I have worth!” Accepting God’s grace can help us see ourselves more clearly, accept ourselves more honestly, and receive the gift more humbly. Any of those things can be life giving, can’t they? Realizing this can be an epiphany: a new understanding about ourselves that comes when God reveals God’s self to us in Jesus Christ. We call this day in the liturgical year “Epiphany”, a day we recognize that God has revealed God’s self in Jesus Christ. But when we see what’s been revealed and the gift being offered us in grace, it prompts our own epiphany. And that, surely, can also provide new life.