

March 19, 2017  
John 4:5-15  
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### **“Heart to Heart”**

**It was a hot day. The kind of day you have to be ready for in the desert. Dry, dusty heat; when it would be 15 degrees cooler in the shade, if there were any shade to be found. This desert had mile after mile of stony wilderness, with only the occasional low scruffy shrub; nothing to give any relief from the sun beating down. It took several days of walking to get from Judea to Galilee; cutting through Samaria shortened the trip somewhat, but it meant hostile stares and curt responses -- even in a culture which practiced hospitality. Jesus and his disciples were road-weary and hungry by the time they reached the Samaritan city of Sychar -- even though they were used to walking. They had started at first light; now it was only mid-day, but no one who had a choice would travel during the middle of the day when the sun was the hottest. They were happy when they made it to the well on the outskirts of the city, where they could sit for a while under the palm trees. But a well without a bucket isn't much use. The disciples knew they had to go into the city to get some food; they'd have to buy it, since they were Jewish; the Samaritans weren't exactly friendly, but they'd be willing to share after a few coins changed hands. The disciples left Jesus sitting beside the well, and went off to see what they could find.**

**The disciples had hardly left when a woman came to the well with her water jar. Like travelers, women were usually out doing the tedious work of hauling water early in the morning or at sunset when it was cooler. But here she was, in the middle of the day, come to draw water, and Jesus was thirsty. “Give me a drink,” he said. And that's the beginning of the longest conversation in the Bible between Jesus and *anyone*.**

It's an unusual conversation right from the start, and it gets odder as it goes along. This conversation lasts for most of the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, so I didn't have Karen read the entire thing. It's a conversation which should not have happened at all. A woman was not supposed to be alone with a man who was not her husband, father, or brother. Women were not supposed to speak to men in public. Samaritans and Jews were ethnic and religious cousins -- something like Irish Catholics and Scotch Presbyterians -- who despised and avoided each other whenever possible. They wouldn't even eat or drink from the same vessels, because they'd be ritually unclean; so even a simple request such as "Give me a drink," would have been a tricky social interaction between these two. But this woman, instead of keep her eyes on the ground and silently drawing water for the unknown Jewish man, says, "Why are you asking me, a woman of Samaria, for a drink?"

And from there, it get even weirder, if that's possible, because Jesus starts talking about living water, water which will never run dry, and will become water that gushes up to eternal life. The woman is curious, but understandably confused. If this living water actually exists, why doesn't this man just give it to her? And if you're never thirsty again when you have this living water, why'd he have to ask her for a drink?

The turning point of this extended conversation happens after verse 16, where Jesus says "Go, call your husband, and come back." And the woman admits that she has no husband. Jesus says, "That's true. You've had five husbands, and the man you're living with now is not your husband." We don't get any more details about this woman's past; the conversation veers off in a theological direction. But I want to consider this part of the conversation, because it's important. It's clearly important to the woman, because she goes from being a skeptic, to becoming a believer. She tells Jesus, "Sir, I see you are a prophet!" But this woman's backstory is significant. Here's what we can say with certainty: any woman who has been married five times and is currently living with a man who is not her husband has had a rough life. We can say that a woman coming to the well by herself at noon is likely an outcast in her community. A Samaritan woman who would have a conversation with a Jewish man she had never met probably has nothing to lose.

**I was trying to think of a way to illustrate this woman's story, and the need she has for acceptance and relationship, because I believe that each one of us has a need for acceptance and relationship, whether we're honest enough to admit it or not. I found my illustration in an unlikely place, a comic strip called Pearls before Swine by Stephen Pastis. The name is a reference to Jesus' words in Matthew 7:6; I don't think the comic is meant to be theological commentary -- one of the characters is a pig-- but I believe there's some insight here. I'll show it to you frame by frame.**

**For most of us, putting out a sign asking for what we need, or even what we hope for, would make us way too vulnerable. That's partly what makes this funny -- if it's funny -- we would ever be this blatant, or allow other people to see the compromises we feel like we have to make to get the acceptance we need. We internalize these things, but that doesn't make them less real. The woman at the well is, I believe, is here in this final frame: she will take whatever she can get. She'd probably be happier if the other women in her community would tolerate her, but even that doesn't seem possible. I doubt if husbands four or five liked her as much as they could; maybe she'd never met anyone who loved her for who she could be, let alone loved her for who she was. That is, until this prophet, this conversation. Notice that Jesus does not shy away from this woman's backstory: he already knows it, and she is honest enough to own it to him. I doubt if the conversation would have gone anywhere if she had lied about why she was at the well at noon by herself. Lying to ourselves and Jesus gets us no where. In fact, it's a recipe for getting others to despise us and treat us badly.**

**But Jesus doesn't dwell on the woman's history, or demand that she go back and fix that string of broken relationships before she comes back and talks to him. Jesus accepts her for who she is, right now, at the place she is, right now, and offers her the possibility of new life -- eternal life. Jesus treats her with dignity and respect, and she recognizes him as a great prophet -- maybe even the Messiah.**

**This relationship transforms this woman. Not only from a skeptic to a believer, but from someone who is physically and emotionally on the margins of her community, to someone who is in the center of her**

community. The disciples come back to the well with lunch and are astonished to see Jesus and this woman deep in conversation, but they are smart enough to keep quiet. The woman is so excited to have met Jesus that she leaves her water jar at the well and runs into the city and tells her neighbors, "Come and see! I have met a man who told me everything I have ever done! He can't be the Messiah, can he?" And so many of the Samaritans listen to her -- her! That woman they could barely tolerate -- that they ask Jesus to stay over for two days. And they tell the woman, "We came at first because of what you told us, but now we've talked to Jesus, we believe for ourselves that he is the Savior of the world."

I believe that this woman receives the living water that Jesus offers in verse 10. That living water is the gift of acceptance and relationship. Relationship with Jesus is the relationship which leads to eternal life. That is why he is the Savior of the world. But there's a catch: we can't have that relationships for someone else: my relationships with Jesus does not guarantee your salvation. But if I have received that living water, then my relationship with you should model the acceptance and love which I have found in Christ. In other words, if I have experienced the acceptance of Jesus Christ, who loves me for who I am, than I need to try to extend that same grace to you.

Believe me, I know this is easier to say than it is to do. Everybody is annoying sometimes, and some people are difficult almost all the time. This is not going to change. But the way we relate to difficult people can change, and how we choose to focus our attention and energy can definitely change. This doesn't apply only to individuals, it applies to groups of people and organizations -- even . . . wait for it . . . the church. I went to a conference this week with Ron Nicodemus, Jan Weaver, Karen Lewallen, and Maryann Zerbe. The conference was sponsored by the Center for Congregations, a faith based organization funded by Eli Lilly. We were energized by this conference and the possibilities for resources and leadership here at Creekside; you'll be hearing more about it. Some of the material that was presented comes from the world of Appreciative Inquiry, an organizational and evaluation model that Cary Kelsey knows well. Appreciative Inquiry, as I understand it, motivates change by building on the best of what we have and do together. I believe it directly applies to the living water we receive, and the living water we offer to

one another. It's *living* water because it happens in the context of relationships. If we don't invest effort in relationships within our church and relationships with people whom we want to become part of our church, no program or church consultant or Church Board initiative is going to create and maintain those relationships for us. No one can do the work of relationship for us. Sharing living water is our responsibility and our privilege.

Here are some building blocks from Appreciative Inquiry: what we think about determines how we talk. What we talk about determines what we imagine. What we imagine determines what we achieve. Let me go through those again.

I want to give you some concrete suggestions for ways to be living water for someone this week and in the future. The first suggestion is the easiest -- at least for me -- and there are some notes about it in your bulletin as the practice of Spiritual Friendship. This is a gift from Irish culture, so even if you didn't drink green beer or cheer for Notre Dame on St. Patrick's Day, here is a way to honor Celtic spirituality. An *anam cara* is a soul friend. It's a little different than a soul mate, which typically is a spouse or life-partner. An *anam cara* is a friend whom you trust and can be completely honest with without fear of being belittled or rejected. Someone who loves you as you are. This is the kind of relationship which Jesus created with the woman at the well. I hope you already have someone like this in your life. If that person goes to church with you at Creekside, that's wonderful, but they don't have to. My *anam cara* moved away from Goshen last year, and I'm leaving town to see her this afternoon. I know I could pick up the phone if I had to, and it would be like no time had passed since the last time we talked. There are some questions in the bulletin for you to ask and listen to with your soul friend. You don't have to follow these questions, of course, but like Jesus and the Samaritan woman, the idea is to move the conversation beyond "How was your week?" "How are the kids?" to something deeper and richer for you both.

The second suggestion is more difficult. You may need to enlist the help of your soul friend or someone else you trust to encourage you and keep you accountable. Remember the frames of that comic strip I showed you? The last two were: Tolerate me and finally I'll take what

**I can get. Think of someone -- they don't have to be at Creekside, but it is fine if they are -- who is difficult for you. Maybe someone you tolerate, but that's all. Or maybe you can't tolerate them. See if you can move your feelings for that person up a frame to something more positive -- such as Just like me or Like me as much as you can. This is not about changing them; it's about inviting God to help change your perception of them. Here are some ways to do that: pray for that person -- even if you begin by praying that they don't annoy you so much. Maybe you can move from there to praying that God would show you what is likable or admirable or tolerable in them. Remember, what we think about (or pray about) determines how we talk. So the next part is not to talk negatively about that person: either in their presence or behind their back. It doesn't mean you have to agree with them or do things their way, it means granting them respect and extending some grace. And finally, if you've worked on the thinking and talking, try treating them the way you would want them to treat you. I didn't come up with this idea -- Jesus and a lot of other folks have preached it--but treating others as you want to be treated it is a pretty great way to be living water to one another, and it can transform relationships. If you haven't tried it, you are lucky if people tolerate you. You might just have to take what you can get.**

**This unlikely heart to heart talk between Jesus and the woman of Samaria is a model of the transformation that can happen when we realize that we are accepted and loved by Jesus Christ. It is a source of living water that we can share with each other and with our family of faith in Christ's name. And all God's people said, "Amen."**