



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

3rd Sunday in Lent: March 15, 2020

Sermon Title: "Living Water"

Gospel Text: John 4:5-42

It's been said that "one's whole life depends on two or three yes's and two or three no's."¹ I've certainly found that to be true in my life. A few key "yes's" and several important "no's" have had a decisive impact on the trajectory of my life. They have resulted in life changing developments regarding my education, career, spouse, and even my children. You've surely experienced the very same thing in your life. The right "yes" or "no" at just the right time can impact nearly everything in *your* life and even in the lives of *others around you*.

Such was the case for the Samaritan woman in today's Gospel. Up until that day when she unexpectedly met Jesus at the well in Sychar, it appears that little in her life had been noteworthy. Her life was marked by drudgery, and so here she was, standing at the well yet again, just like she did every day, because you've got to have water. Water is life.

Noon of course wasn't the optimal time to be walking to a well and drawing water because it was usually the hottest part of the day. The one simple pleasure in drawing water from a well was the chance to see your friends and catch up on the gossip. But no one else would be expected to be at the well at noon. Maybe that was the point. Catching up on the gossip isn't much fun when *you're* the subject. And so maybe this woman was there at noon quite intentionally, hoping to be left alone. After all, she knew her history. She knew the yes's in her life that probably should have been no's, and the no's that should have been yes's. She didn't need any of her neighbors to remind her again.

But everything changed for her at that well. Turns out she wasn't alone. A tired and thirsty stranger had joined her there. There were all sorts of reasons why they had no business talking to one another or even being cordial. That's just not how men and women interacted in that particular time and place. But even more scandalous was the fact that she was a Samaritan and he was a Jew. They stood on opposite sides of a vast range of serious ethnic, religious, and even political matters.

At first she tried to keep this stranger – Jesus - at a distance. Maybe you've tried to do the same thing. Maybe you too have figured that you have little in common with him. Maybe you've even assumed he's approached you only so he can remind *you* of all the yes's in your life that probably should have been no's, and the no's that should have been yes's.

But Jesus has a way of drawing a person in. He's much less interested in your *past* than he is your *future*. And so he comes to you in the present with only one agenda in mind: *love*. But I'm not just talking about the love he has *for you*. *That* love is as wide as the cosmos. *That*

love he gives to you without price or condition. But there's *another* love that also matters to Jesus: the love, or lack thereof, that you have for yourself. After all, it's awfully hard to believe that Jesus can love *you* if *you* are no longer capable of loving *yourself*.

We see this in Jesus's exchange with the Samaritan woman. As they discussed the water he was seeking from the well, and the transformative living water only he could provide, the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman unfolded on the foundation of respect and dignity. Even when he raised the subject of the woman's relationships, he did so in such a gentle way, not to shame her, but to reveal to her that she was worthy of so much more. Nevertheless, she still worried that the differences between Samaritans and Jews were too great. She wondered if Jesus really wished to bless her, or if she would forever be an outsider.

Who are the Samaritan women in our midst? Who are the people in our community who've been labeled and stigmatized to believe that their worth is the sum total of every mistake and compromise they've ever made? Who in our community has been rendered *hopeless* because they've become convinced that Jesus and the Church see them as *worthless*? Jesus is calling us to boldly reach out to those people as ambassadors of his love because his love has the power to restore hope, restore dignity, restore worth, and transform hearts and lives.

This Gospel lesson is really long – 38 verses. There's so much going on in this story. But of all those verses, the one I find absolutely electrifying is the beginning of verse 28. "Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city." Just think about what this means. That verse marks the absolute transformation of this woman's heart. Remember, she had come here at the height of the day to perform the drudgery of securing water from the well. Even though water is life, she probably had to drag herself there. But after encountering Jesus, her soul was unburdened. She was nearly floating on air. The Good News had lifted her to such an extent that she left her water jar behind because she couldn't wait to race back to her neighbors and tell them about the *living water* she had found.

Yes, she was racing back to town to share something priceless with those same neighbors who knew all of her history. But it didn't matter anymore. She was freed from those labels and her past, and she wanted her neighbors – even those who probably had treated her like trash – to be freed as well. What a remarkable woman! She had only known Jesus for a few minutes, and already she was a more faithful missionary of the Gospel than those disciples who had walked with Jesus for months and months. So don't let anyone tell *you* that you're disqualified from sharing Christ with others because you don't *know* enough or have enough *experience* or you have some *history* you wish you could rewrite. Welcome to the club! Jesus has a power that exceeds any of our qualifications. Trust that a transformed heart is all that you truly need. Put down your jar of water, because Jesus is calling all of us into the world to share his living water.²

"One's whole life depends on two or three yes's and two or three no's." It's true, isn't it? Jesus said "yes" to the Samaritan woman, and it changed her life. In response, she said yes to Jesus, and then took his Good News to her neighbors, who were intrigued enough that they too came to Jesus to drink his living water. The disciples viewed the Samaritans as a barren wasteland. But Jesus saw them as a field ripe for harvesting. So who are the people in our midst whom we are overlooking?

A final thought... An important detail is missing in today's Gospel lesson. The Samaritan woman's name is omitted. She's one of the greatest evangelists in the New Testament. Wouldn't you like to know her name? I don't know what she was called before that noonday encounter she had with Jesus at the well. Chances are that many of the names her community had attached to her up to that point were pretty hurtful.

But holy tradition tells us that the Samaritan woman was baptized and given a new name: *Photina*, which means "daughter of light." According to tradition, Photina remained a brave and faithful missionary of the Gospel to the very end. Through her, countless people were brought to Christ, including two sons, five sisters, Emperor Nero's daughter, and a court official whom Nero had sent to order Photina to renounce her faith. But she never did, even when Nero made her a martyr by ordering her to be thrown down a well.³ Her life ended, but Photina's inspiring example lives on. Jesus said "yes" to her, and so she said "yes" to Jesus. That made all the difference in her life and in the lives of countless others. May Jesus's "yes" transform *our* lives and *our* community as well. Amen.

Citation:

¹ Augustin Cochin (1876-1916)

² I'm indebted to "The Well of Life" by Georges Chevrot, which wonderfully unpacks this Gospel lesson in a devotional and non-scholarly manner.

³ See, e.g., www.oca.org/saints/lives/2009/03/20/100846-martyr-photina-the-samaritan-woman-her-sons-and-those-with-them