

The Other Good Samaritan

I'd like to begin with a warning—expect to be thirsty by the end of this sermon. This story is about water, H₂O, 70% of our bodies, what covers 70% of the earth's surface. Water is life, which makes water a perfect symbol of God's love, the source of all life.

Everyone deserves to have water to drink. Clean water. Accessible water. Enough water. Water is a human right.

More than 1/4 of the world's population still obtains their daily water the way the Samaritan woman did, carrying it from a community source like a well or a river. Most of the time, the task of getting water still belongs to women, or to girls. Improvement in clean water access improves women's health and well-being, which in turn raises the living standards of the entire community. Yet, exacerbated by climate change, it is estimated that unless current water use patterns change, by the year 2030, demand for water will exceed supply by 40%.

(<https://theconversation.com/women-still-carry-most-of-the-worlds-water-81054>) Water is life.

So who can blame the unnamed Samaritan woman at the well for being focused on her need for physical water and not understanding that Jesus was changing the subject, talking about water as a spiritual symbol?!

She was already living on the margin. Fetching the family water is an early morning and evening task, but there she was at midday. In another couple of verses, we will learn that she has had five husbands. We aren't told why. Perhaps she has been widowed four times and her first husbands' brothers have followed the custom of marrying their brother's widow—four times over. Or maybe her situation is caused by divorce. Women could not divorce their husbands, but perhaps four men had divorced her. Maybe it was what appeared to be her "bad luck" that ostracized her. We don't know. But she is outside the women's community, which might have given her support and friendship.

She is also from beyond the community in which Jesus and his disciples usually converse. Jesus and his friends are traveling through Samaria, but they are Jews, and the text tells us that Jews and Samaritans don't share things like water vessels. In Jesus' day, Jews and Samaritans had kept their distance for at least 150 years and at worst, they considered each other enemies.

There is a third reason this conversation is surprising in its context. In first century Palestine, men and women lived in separate spheres. Men talked to men, women talked to women unless they were family to one another. Public conversations bordered on the scandalous. A man talking to another man's wife at a well could start some gossip.

So I call her the "other" good Samaritan. Because by the conventions of the day, she was thrice "other." She was "other" in gender to Jesus, she was "other" in ethnicity and religion, and she was even "other" in her own community. In today's lingo, "othering" is a term used to describe that which leads people to view or treat a person as intrinsically different from, alien, and usually of lesser value because they are not perceived to be the "same." They are "other."

Yet this story reveals this Samaritan woman to be "good" in the eyes of God. Jesus engages her as a fully worthy human, a person of dignity and value. She is not "other," she is good. She turns out to

be theologically articulate and competent, and she becomes an evangelist to her people. She's not the good Samaritan we usually think of—Dan preached about him last week—she's the "Other" Good Samaritan. Yet unlike the man who took care of the beaten-up traveler, whom we think of as a pure example of neighbor love, we have mixed feelings about this woman.

The history of biblical interpretation has made some unjustified assumptions about her. She's been called a "tramp," or a "sexual sinner," based on her marital history. Yet the text does not make that judgment, and neither does Jesus. I'm reminded of the old song, "She is more to be pitied than censured," the last line of which is "For a moment please stop and consider, that a man was the cause of it all." (<https://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/s/sheismoretokepitedthancensured.html>) We don't know her story, and it's presumptuous of us to judge.

It also can be hard for us to see her goodness because she's needy, and her profound neediness is evident in her need for water. We tend to take water for granted. We are blessed with clean, affordable water, fresh from the snow on the mountaintops. It fills our streams and rivers. We have reservoirs and pipes, aquifers and wells, and when we turn on the tap, clean water appears. We assume it always will. Yet even in our country, that assumption doesn't always hold. Think of Flint, Michigan. Or consider the water supply in some of Montana's tribal communities. On the Ft. Peck Reservation, a new water treatment plant was completed just a few years ago, allowing people to drink clean water from their taps instead of relying on bottled water. Now the Keystone XL Pipeline is slated to cross the Missouri River upstream from the intake for the water treatment plant. What if there is an oil spill? Tribal leaders are very concerned. We heard this from several people earlier this year on our mission trip. Lois Red Elk, a traditional Lakota elder who lives in Poplar, told us, "The next crisis will be about water, and it won't just be here on the reservation. It will affect you in Bozeman, too." (conversation, 5/31/18) Those who need clean water aren't "others," they are all of us. Even Jesus needed water. He asked the woman at the well for help, because he was thirsty and didn't have a bucket for water.

So we see in this story one beggar asking another beggar for water, one needy person giving another needy person life's essentials. And in the sharing, comes the revealing of eternal and spiritual truth. The other good Samaritan, the woman at the well, gives water and receives love. Jesus receives water, and gives salvation. In the sharing of life-giving water, God's love is poured into the woman's heart by the Holy Spirit. She runs back to the village to share what she has seen and known in Jesus. He spends two days in the Samaritan village. And scripture tells us, many more believed. The story started with a shared cup of water, and ended with the living water of God's reconciling love.

My friends, our Christian faith does not divide the physical from the spiritual, the body from the soul. It brings them together. Jesus was God incarnate, that is, in flesh. Jesus ate because he was hungry. He thirsted for water, and understood our physical need for water because it was his need, too. But just as he quoted the scripture which says, "Humans do not live by bread alone," he also told the Samaritan woman, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water I will give will never be thirsty. The water I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

And the light begins to dawn for this good woman—he is offering her the source of water, the source of life—God, who is Love.

This story does not dismiss the real biological need of living things for real physical water. But it also does not leave it at that. We human beings need spiritual, living water, the ever-moving life source

which is God. The cup of cool water is “the visible manifestation of a deeper reality.” (Anna Carter Florence, 2010, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 97)

The deeper reality is the Love at the heart of life. In our exploration of God’s love this fall, we are circling among four themes—that God loves the world, that God commands our love for God, that God also commands our love for others, and that God is Love. All four perspectives on love are in this story. The sign of living water is a sign that God is love, eternal, ever-flowing, the source and the destination of our life. God gives us water out of love, for God made the world and all that is in it out of love. God asks for our love in return, fulfilling the relationship. And God expects us to love one another, giving a cup of cold water to anyone who is thirsty, breaking down the distinctions we create making us strangers, “others” to one another. For when it comes to thirst, we’re all the same. We’re equally needy, equally thirsty. And, Jesus shows us, we all can drink from the same vessel, the fount of God’s ever-flowing love.

Water is life—biologically speaking and spiritually speaking. The Hebrew people knew that in the desert, and God answered their cries. The psalms sing of thirst for God—“My soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” (Ps 63:1) And the answer to that thirst? “He leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul.” (Ps 23:2) The prophets spoke God’s promise of life restored: “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters!” (Is 55:1) and “I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants and my blessing on your offspring.” (Is 44:3) And later in John’s gospel, Jesus cries out to the crowds gathered for a festival at the Temple in Jerusalem, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.” (John 7:37-38)

The other good Samaritan, the woman at the well, knew exactly what he was saying.

May we also, in sharing water with one another and with the world, meet the living Christ.