

Third Sunday in Lent, A  
John 4:5-42  
The Woman at the Well

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We're becoming familiar with a term most of us hadn't even heard of a week ago: *social distancing*. *Social distancing* is really hard for church people, because Christian community is all about relationships. Already we're missing each other. One person said, "I don't even get to look forward to church anymore!" While we are protecting our health and our community, we will also do our best to resist becoming isolated and try to stay connected -- with God and each other.

Our scripture today is about overcoming isolation. Last week we read that famous passage – *For God so loved the world that God gave God's only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

This morning we get to see what it really means for God to love the world --not to love just some people but all people. To bring all people into relationship with God and each other.

Jesus had a deep and searching conversation with a Samaritan woman, and that's remarkable in so many ways. Jews and Samaritans were divided by centuries of prejudice and hate. They considered each other unclean. It was taboo for a pious man like Jesus to even speak with a female stranger, much less be alone with her, or request a drink from her hand -- but of course that's the first thing Jesus did.

He did it because God is no respecter of *social distancing* when it's motivated by prejudice or hatred. Because *God so loved the world*, Jesus' mission was all about bringing God's love to the whole world. So Jesus intentionally smashed through every boundary to connect with this Samaritan woman and through her, with her people.

This is actually the longest conversation Jesus had with anyone in the Bible. That's incredible! And it's also the first time in John's gospel that Jesus revealed his divine identity to anyone. Amazingly, and significantly, Jesus trusted an outsider, a rejected person, a woman, to become the very first witness to God's promise of new life. That's because God is intent on sharing God's love *with the world*.

Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman respectfully and deeply and patiently. He spoke with her about profound questions and personal questions, drawing her out bit by bit. And little by little the woman came to understand that Jesus is God's living water, gushing up to eternal life.

Living water means water that moves, like a running stream or a surging ocean. God's love is never still but is ever-flowing, and never-ending. God is our source of endless spiritual refreshment. In relationship with God, we will never be thirsty again. Even in times when we feel spiritually dry or empty in the face of very new circumstances and worry and yes, this new challenge of *social distancing* -- God has the power to sustain us and refresh us and revive us again.

*Social distancing* was all too familiar to this Samaritan woman. It's unusual that she came to the well at noon, in the heat of the day. Most women would meet up at the well in the cool hours of morning or evening, staying awhile to socialize and chat. But this woman came alone, at high noon, which is our clue that she was a social outcast.

Jesus knew why she was rejected by others. It wasn't that she was sinful or immoral in any way. Many scholars are now questioning that traditional interpretation of her circumstances. Notice that Jesus never judged or blamed or shamed this woman. Jesus understood that she had a long painful history related to marriage. She'd been cast off or divorced or widowed by five husbands – leaving her in an incredibly vulnerable situation—and one possible reason for why that happened might be that she was unable to bear children. Infertility was considered a curse in those days. A woman who could not bear children was considered worthless.

Jesus also knew that at the present time, this woman found herself living in the household of someone who was “not her husband.” It's very likely this man was the brother of a husband who had died, who was obligated to take her in as a charity case. It could not have been a happy life.

So this woman was marked by a long, sad history – a string of bad fortune the other women wanted nothing to do with. But she didn't have to explain herself to Jesus. Jesus knew her story. And it was in no way a barrier for him.

Jesus reassured her, “I know who you are. Now let me tell you who I am. I am the living water that never stops flowing. I am the Savior you have been waiting for.”

And here's the wonderful thing – she got it! She believed what so many others could not believe. And before long she was sharing her joyfully surprised faith with everyone in the village. This outcast Samaritan woman became a pioneer in helping God *so love the world*.

So I wonder, today, how we will live in response to this beautiful promise of living water. I wonder how we will make it part of our lives as we move through this time of *social distancing*?

First of all, I encourage all of us to drink deeply from God's wells of hope – especially when fear is threatening us so strongly. Let's remember that we were not created for fear, but for confidence and courage and hope, drawing on God's everlasting presence and love. Let's keep directing our hearts and minds to the beautiful, refreshing presence of God, our loving Creator whose springs of goodness just keep coming, to satisfy us with what we need. God's love will never run dry. So we pray for God's help and stay open to this divine refreshment.

Second, it's good for us to keep busy with tasks that are helpful and meaningful. It might mean doing your taxes or doing some spring cleaning. If the weather is mild, yard cleanup or walking outdoors will refresh you. You could read that book that's on your shelf, perhaps a devotional or faith-based book that can inspire you. You could even pick up your Bible! I recommend beginning with the gospels and Paul's letters to the church.

Most of all, I encourage all of us to stay in touch. Please pray for others both near and far. Our prayer chain is a great vehicle (to join, email [firstimmanuelprayers@gmail.com](mailto:firstimmanuelprayers@gmail.com) ) Keep checking our website and enews and facebook posts for devotions.

I would like to commend to you the good old-fashioned telephone. We can be a real blessing to each other if every day we make at least one or two phone calls to people who might be lonely or isolated. They could be church members or other neighbors and acquaintances. A friendly voice can make all the difference. If you need a copy of the church directory, simply contact the church office or call us pastors and we'll email a copy to you. We'd love to talk to you too. We care about each other and it's important to live that out.

In the midst of this disorienting time, God still has good gifts to give us – gifts of relationship which have the power to overcome every type of distancing. We are being drawn more and more deeply into relationship with the God who knows us better than we even know ourselves – and loves us forever and always, no matter what. And drawn close together too, in love and concern and holy hope.

*God so loves this world* – and God's refreshing love will never stop. May God center all of us strongly in refreshing love and reveal to us many ways to share.

In Jesus' name, Amen.