

IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

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John 4:5-30, 40-42 (ref. Isaiah 55:1-8)

So Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him. []

So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word.

*Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote... It might not be April yet, but tomorrow is the first day of spring. And what did Chaucer say? Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages... If you wanted to see the world in the Middle Ages, you went on a pilgrimage. So if *The Canterbury Tales* reads a little like a bunch of people telling stories in the bar on a cruise ship, well, that's not too far off the mark.*

And back when Chaucer was writing the *Canterbury Tales*, there was a real-life travel memoir writer and spiritual seeker, very entertaining, rather a gadfly—an intrepid woman called Margery Kempe. You might say that Margery Kempe was the Shirley MacLaine of the fourteenth century.

I felt a little like Margery Kempe last summer, when I took a detour on my pilgrimage to Iona in order to make another brief pilgrimage—to Norwich, where Margery Kempe before me had gone to consult with Dame Julian. I too wanted to see Julian's cell. I don't know what spiritual raptures I thought I might

experience there, but there was something about that little Norman chapel, even rebuilt as it was since the bombings of the Second World War.

There was a poster on a bulletin board in the entryway, with a rainbow on it and dotted with musical notes, inviting anyone who wanted to, to come and sing in their ecumenical, all-inclusive choir. From what it said, it was clear that this historic church was very much alive in the twenty-first century; and that it had, through the centuries, offered hospitality to all kinds of strangers, all kinds of pilgrims, all kinds of seekers; and in so doing, had, to their joy and delight, entertained angels unawares.

And it made me think of all the seekers I've met. You've met some, too, and probably most of us have *been* seekers, too, at some time or other in our lives. We all seem to need to do it for ourselves, strike out on our own, "boldly go where none has gone before" (we think), reinvent the spiritual wheel; but then, at some point, we realize that we aren't all that original, or that highly evolved, even; and that it's just so much more *fun* to be on this pilgrimage with other people. So we discover Christian community, and sometimes, we even discover *church*, which, at its best, is where we can tell our stories, bear one another's burdens, and find strength for the journey.

Well, here we are, in church, in the middle of Lent. And if in Lent you want a little mortification, here's another long story from the Gospel of John, one of those stories where the meaning twists and turns like a dowsing rod, and—let's see how far I can push this "well" metaphor—we dig deeper and deeper until, at least today, we either finally learn to stop digging, or...we come to living water.

So...let's dig a little. Have you ever noticed words that mean more than they seem to mean? Or their meaning has shifted over time? Or maybe they are even their own opposite? There's even a name for that: a *contronym*.

Yes, all this is catnip for word geeks like me, but I know I'm not alone. I know there are some English majors out there. And this *is* going somewhere. But this bit is fun. So here goes.

When you *dust*, are you applying dust or removing it? It depends whether you're dusting the crops or dusting the furniture.

Seed can also go either way. If you seed the lawn, you add seeds; but if you seed a tomato, you remove them.

Stone—be careful with this one! You can stone some peaches, but please don't stone your neighbor, even if he's out back...*getting* stoned.

Trim as a verb predates the noun, but it, too, means either adding or taking away. And the context doesn't always make it clear. Trimming the tree? Would that be with tinsel, or a chain saw?

Sometimes it's generational. Many of the words that meant one thing in one generation mean the exact opposite a generation later. Think about the word "Bad." Or "cool," or "hot." Is a "hot" car a "cool" car, or a "stolen" car? And is that "bad" as in "bad," or "bad" as in..."cool," or maybe even "hot?" Words are slippery that way. A living language evolves over time. And then, some words simply do have more than one meaning, like multiple personalities, and understanding *which* meaning the speaker has in mind requires some familiarity with the language, and also with the context. And sometimes, the speaker intends to play on that double meaning. Translators really tear their hair out on that one—think of all the footnotes you've seen in your Bible.

Okay, so with all that in mind, let's turn to our lesson today. It's another time in the life of Jesus when somebody misunderstands what he's really saying, but then they're gradually drawn into a fuller understanding as the conversation progresses.

Well now, John loves this stuff! He really plays with it. I think John, of all the rest of the Gospel writers, is closest to the circle around the campfire. His Gospel is written to be read aloud. The stories are full of double meanings, visual "rhymes," and multifaceted symbols that, at first, confuse the people who

meet Jesus, usually because they're taking literally things he means figuratively. I think that John's Jesus talks that way to get our attention.

Remember Nicodemus? He thinks Jesus is telling him he has to be "born again," *literally*, and he thinks, well, that really isn't fair to his mother. And then, today, here we have John telling us what happens when Jesus meets a Samaritan woman by a village well.

In almost every chapter of John's Gospel we hear the trickling of water—water of baptism, water turned to wine, new birth in water and spirit, a healing pool, a storm at sea, Jesus as "living water;" and then, in Holy Week, footwashing, a stream of water and blood pouring from the side of the crucified Lord; and at last, breakfast on the beach, and the amazing catch of fish. It's as though John gathers his listeners not around a campfire at all, but by the water, bubbling and splashing in the background, as John rings changes on water at each moment in his story of Jesus.

Here with the woman at the well, the conversation begins naturally enough, around water. He is thirsty, she is wary. But think: on a deeper level, he *has* what she needs, and she is desperately seeking.

It must have been awkward at first, since he was a Jew, and she was a Samaritan. And it matters that Jesus was a man and she a woman. They wouldn't have spoken, ordinarily.

And as the story is usually translated, this woman would have become wary of men over her lifetime of being used and tossed aside. She wouldn't have wanted to talk with this man, or anyone else, for that matter, at the well at noontime. That was, after all, the only time "*those*" women dared come for water. The *respectable* village women came to the well early in the day, when it was cool, when the water flowed cool and the gossip flowed hot, especially about that woman in the village who'd married five husbands and was now living with a sixth.

But remember that discussion about words. What if that wasn't all there was to it? What if the original words really meant something else, in this story?

Remember, although John wrote his Gospel in Greek, the widely-spoken language of business in the Mediterranean world, any conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan would have been in *their* common first language, Aramaic.

And so, what about if, in its long journey from Aramaic through Greek to our English Bibles today, this story experienced a significant mutation? What if the story we have today is the result of somebody—the first translator from Aramaic into Greek—missing a key shade of meaning? What do you get, then, if you translate it back, literally, from Greek to Aramaic? The whole story starts to make a lot more sense!

Here we have a story about a despised group—the Samaritans—coming to understand who Jesus really is. It's a story about how the Good News of God Among Us is good news not only for an elite few, but for everyone.

So if that's what it's really about, what does this business about five husbands really contribute, and why does the woman go about joyfully saying "He told me all I ever did." *All*? Were the five husbands *all*, was that really *all* her life had been about? Sounds like what she really needed to find first wasn't the Lord of the Universe but a twelve-step program.

But how about this: the way you say "husband" in Aramaic is *baal*—that's right, the same word you read over and over in the Old Testament prophets, even in the English Old Testament: the *baals*, which means, when you read about them there, the local Canaanite deities.

The people of God are always being led astray worshipping the local gods, the local *baals*: all through the prophets you hear this. But the word doesn't mean a god, really: it really means "lord," "master," "owner," "*husband*." And if you look it up in the concordance, you'll find that in the English Old Testament, *baal* is even, in the appropriate context, regularly translated "husband."

And then, if you go to Bible study regularly, you remember all the times in the Old Testament when the People of God are compared to a wife who has been unfaithful to her “husband,” God, who, no matter what, loves and forgives them, and wants them back. Come to think of it, that’s *all* the Book of Hosea is about.

So, how about this? How about if the point is not five husbands, but five *deities*, five religions, maybe, or things that function in our lives as religions, and now, she’s shackled up with a sixth? What if, let’s say, she’d grown up in a conventional religious household, then got mixed up with drugs, then been to an ashram in India, then came back and lived in a commune, then got caught up in an animal liberation movement, then got arrested demonstrating at the College of the Americas, then went to seminary... well, you get the picture.

What if she’s more like Margery Kempe? What if she’s really more like what we’d call a “seeker,” looking everywhere for meaning, for faith community, and now, at last, she *is* talking to the Savior of the World—she just doesn’t quite know it yet.

Remember, Jesus says, “the one you have now is not your husband.” Could he be, simply, and without judging her at all, referring to *himself*—knowing that although she hasn’t quite yet accepted him as her Lord, she soon will? Do you see now how the story hangs together, how it isn’t caught up short by the distraction of the five husbands, if you understand the five husbands to represent the five religious paths she’s taken, looking in all the wrong places for...nothing other than living water?

Now, let’s dip deeper into our well. Let’s think now about what Jesus *doesn’t* say. He doesn’t say, as he does later in John’s gospel when a woman’s sins *do* have to do with men, to “go and sin no more.” He doesn’t overlook her for being a Samaritan, or a woman. But there’s more.

In fact, she becomes the first in this Gospel story to tell the good news of Jesus to an entire village. This woman is nothing less than the first evangelist in John’s Gospel for the Kingdom of God!

Jesus doesn’t try to fix her. He *doesn’t* give her a step-by-step recovery model, or a plan of salvation. He *doesn’t* call her to repent. He doesn’t even offer a prayer—at least, not an embarrassing one out loud.

Indeed, it’s what Jesus *doesn’t* say that may have gotten her attention in the first place. In her worldly experience, she would have expected a strange man to use her, or if he were a preacher, to use her in a different way—as fodder for a blistering sermon. Instead, Jesus invites her to a quiet place, to see a reflection of herself in the living water of his love. He wants to open up her heart and mind to a whole new way of seeing herself, her world, and her God.

It’s a gradual process for her, to be sure, as it is for each of us. Jesus talks about the living water within her reach, and she thinks only concretely about water at the bottom of a well. He talks about worship, and she thinks too literally about forms of liturgy. But slowly, like a desert flower opening in the rain, her heart begins to unfold. She grows from seeing Jesus as a Jewish man in her Samaritan village, to calling *him* “sir” (another play on *baal!*), to realizing he is a prophet, to proclaiming him as the Messiah—indeed, as her fellow villagers say, the Savior of the World.

In the end, she sees clearly that this Jesus is indeed the water of life—the Living God whom she has been seeking in all the wrong places. So giddy is she with this good news that she hastens to the very city whose men shared her, and whose women shunned her, to let them know where they might satisfy their real thirst, too.

And isn’t that what the Body of Christ can still do, and be, for all seekers, today? Come, all who thirst! Come to the waters. Welcome home.

AMEN.