

Vulnerability and Grace

John 4

This is a story about vulnerability and grace. It is a story of a woman who came looking for a little water, and received what she never expected to find. More than water, she found a spring of grace, acceptance, and love. She was looking for something practical, and she found something eternal; she was hoping for a little help, and life-long healing. I'm simply going to tell this story, and leave it to you to apply it to your life. Perhaps you identify with the woman; perhaps you identify with the village; perhaps you identify with the Savior; perhaps at time or another, you've been all three. As you listen to this story, listen between the lines to hear what God is saying to you.

The day started like any other day. The woman – who knows what her name was, and very few people cared – got up early and cleaned the small one room house, with dirt floor that she called home. It wasn't her house, but it was a roof over her head. The house belonged to the man she lived with, her husband for all intents and purposes, but he wouldn't marry her. She didn't have a choice in the matter; she had nowhere else to go, and was glad he took her in. He wasn't what you would call a "good man", but he didn't abuse her and she had a place to live. So, like every morning, while he was still sleeping she got up and made a fire, cleaned, and put breakfast on the table.

Once the village started to stir, the woman could hear the other women heading off to get water. It was early, the sun was just over the horizon, and it was not yet hot. She used to go with the women to the well for water. When she was married the first time, she went every day. But her husband divorced her – said he just wanted to move on – and she married again, and then the women started to whisper. She went with them anyway, hoping they would soon forget her trouble and talk about someone else. But when her husband left her, it was not use. She couldn't go to the well anymore with the others; they whispered behind her back and glared to her face. She wasn't welcome with them. She married again, but her third husband died not long after. Three husbands, and now a widow. One of the third husband's brothers married her; it wasn't love, but he was kind and wanted to give her a place to stay. But it didn't last long; he was a troubled man, and divorced her after only a year. A stranger came to town not long after that, he didn't know her story and they got along well – and he married her. A fifth husband, a fifth home, a fifth family. And then, two years later, he left town as suddenly as he had arrived. Gone – no divorce papers, no message, no goodbye. Just gone.

Five husbands, all of them gone. What was going to do? There was no one to help, nowhere to turn. Technically she wasn't divorced, so she couldn't even remarry! So he took her in; the man she now treated as her husband. It was a far cry from love, but she was grateful – she nowhere else to go, and now she had a home. Underneath her gratitude, though, was a great deep well of pain. Like every other woman in her culture, she dreamed of marrying a good man, and building a fine home, and having lots of children. She dreamed of taking her place among the

women of the community, as her mother and grandmother had done. When she was a girl, she went with her mother to the well early in the morning with the other women in town; she heard them talk about life, their husbands and families and children, about politics and religion, they laughed and teased; it was a good life. And it would be her life, so she thought. But not. Not after two husbands, then a third, and fourth, fifth. There would be no more husbands, no children or grandchildren; no more journeys to the well.

Now, she went to the well alone. She waited, puttered around the house, try to look busy while the other women went and came back with jars of water. When the sun rose high in the sky and the heat of the day beat down; when everyone else was at home having lunch or finding a spot of shade, then she would go out. When the streets were empty and the well was deserted, she would go – alone, to draw water, alone with her pain.

On this particular day, she met a man at the well. She had never seen him there before, he was a stranger, and a Jew. She was a Samaritan, and this was a Samaritan well. Jews did not speak to Samaritan; and Samaritans did not speak to Jews. It simply wasn't done. But this man whom she had never seen before suddenly spoke to her, and asked for a drink of water. It took her a minute to figure out what was going on – it so shocked her. Jews don't ask things of Samaritans, a Jewish man certainly doesn't ask anything of a Samaritan woman. She told the man, "What are you doing, asking me for this?" And then he said the strangest thing: "If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking me for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water." "What was this man talking about?" He didn't even had a bucket – how could he give her water. He must be crazy. But then he said it again, and he meant it – his eyes weren't crazy, they were serious and kind. "Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life."

Why not ask, she thought? What's the harm in asking? If he could give her something so she didn't have to come to this well anymore, that would be a miracle! Maybe a magic bucket that would never go empty. She wouldn't have to come in the heat of the day anymore; she wouldn't have to feel the cold and judgmental stares of the village, their eyes following her down the street. She wouldn't have to feel ashamed and embarrassed in public anymore. She could just stay at home, and live in peace behind four walls. "Sir, give me this water so I won't ever get thirsty, won't ever have to come back to this well again!"

Then, Jesus crossed the line. Jesus, this stranger who spoke strange things, crossed the line; he shattered her privacy, and knocked on the door of her secret shame. "Go, call your husband and come back." If only she could call her husband! Maybe she could go track down the one who ran out, but who knows where he went! If only could call back the one who died; if only she could call the ones who left, so they could see her pain. If only she could call the first one who left, who left and took her dreams with him. If only. She answered, "I have no husband." It was a thin lid placed on a well of pain, and Jesus promptly took the lid off and exposed her

shame. *“That’s nicely put: ‘I have no husband.’ You’ve had five husbands, and the man you’re living with now isn’t even your husband. You spoke the truth there, sure enough.”*

She was mortified, humiliated; this man was a prophet, and here he was leading her on, and then humiliating her. She didn’t know what to say, and so she did what any us of would do; when the subject got to close, she tried to change the subject; she tried to provoke the stranger in a debate about politics and religion. He answered, again cryptically, and she was done with the conversation. “When the Messiah comes, he’ll sort it all out.” She’d heard that line before from the women, but she probably meant it more than most – for she had more to sort out than most. Then the stranger said the most surprising thing: “I am he – the one you’ve been talking with!”

In that moment, for the first time in a long time, the pit in her stomach went away. She forgot all about the shame she felt, that bottomless well of pain. It was overwhelmed by what she just heard. The Messiah, the Son of God, had been talking to her. She had spoken with him. He knew all about her, and still he accepted her. He treated her with kindness and compassion. He offered her living water! She still didn’t know what this meant – but he offered it to her. The people in town wouldn’t even offer her a sympathetic look, and this man offered her living water. He accepted her, even though he knew everything about her, he accepted her. What grace! What amazing grace! Without a single self-conscious thought, without any hesitation, the woman took off running into town. For the first time in years, she looked people in eye – each person she met, standing straight, radiating excitement, she looked them in the eye, and *“Come and see! Come and see!”* And they came and saw, and never looked at her the same way again.

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