

## **“Like the Woman at the Well”**

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Dr. Kipp A. Wolfe

John 4:3-19, 28-30, 39-42

One day when I was laid up with the flu and in bed, I wondered at that time if I were in my death bed. I stumbled out of bed and staggered into the other room and turned on the television. It was during the daytime. If you've ever watched television during the daytime, you know that there is just not a lot on. We get about 500 channels and out of those 500 channels I decided there might be three things worth watching. There was an old rerun of “Leave It to Beaver,” Barbara Walters and some other women sitting around a table whining about how bad things are, and a T.V. preacher preaching about the Gospel of Success.

As you might imagine, I chose “Leave It to Beaver.” I'm glad I did. It was one of those wonderful, delightful episodes. Beaver was going to be taking an I.Q. test at school. He was trying to study the night before the test, which you can't do. He was going over his math facts and Ward, the dad, was working with him. Beaver just could not remember  $4 \times 4 = 16$ . He was coming up with 8, 12, everything but 16. Ward was worried, but then Wally reminded Ward that it didn't really help to study.

Beaver went to school the next day and took the test. Ward gets a call at his office. Beaver had made the highest score of anyone in the school, and the second highest score in the history of the test. Ward was ecstatic. He called June and told her. June was a little bit more level-headed than Ward. She said, “*Our* Beaver made the highest test score?” Now, how many Beavers could there be?

Ward started calling all his buddies, bragging and making plans for Beaver to attend some kind of private school. The next day, as you might imagine, the teacher and another student from the school come to visit with Ward and June. It turns out that the student is new in school and he's jealous of Beaver because Beaver is so popular. This student is the intelligent one. He has switched their tests. He put his name on Beaver's test and Beaver's name on his test. Beaver didn't really have the highest test score. Surprise. Surprise.

Can you imagine the woman in our scripture today getting a Wife of the Year Award?” She had been married five times. She was living with another man in the present. But don't be too harsh on the woman. We don't know why she was married five times. In those days if a woman burned supper a man could sue for a certificate of divorce and be granted that divorce. Maybe her husbands died. Maybe she poisoned them. We don't know, but don't be too harsh on the woman.

We sang the hymn, “Like the Woman at the Well.” We seek things that don't satisfy. This story is one of my favorite in all of the Bible, not just because it is full of truth

for us, but because it is *our* story. It's not just a parable. I've shared with you that the parable of the Prodigal Son is my favorite parable, but this is a real story, it really happened.

One reason I like this story so much is because I have been to Jacob's well. I was in Israel. The circumstances were similar. Did you hear in the scripture? Jesus had to go through Samaria. He was in Judea on his way to Galilee, but to get from Judea to Galilee it was necessary to go through Samaria. The Jews hated the Samaritans and the Samaritans hated the Jews. He considered going to the east and going around Samaria, taking a longer trip, but someone decided, no, let's go on through. Just as the group I was in. Our guide wanted us to see Jacob's well, but he was afraid to go through the town of Sychar. He was afraid that people in the town of Sychar might throw rocks at our tour bus. So we went around the edge of town and went to Jacob's well.

We had to go down some steps to get to the well. When we got down to the steps with our group, about 15 or 20 of us, our guide, named Jimmy turned to me and said to me, "Do you want to turn the crank?" So I let the bucket down. It was a long ways—several feet, and I started cranking this bucket back up to the top. I got it back up to the top. We had a dipper, and we all shared a drink of water from Jacob's well. It was as good as any I had ever drunk in my life. It was clear and cool. It was a hot day, so you can imagine.

We had been on an air-conditioned bus. Jesus had been walking. We read that he was tired out from his journey. So these two people, the Savior who is tired out by his journey, and the woman who is just tired out by life, meet each other. It is important to note the time of day—at noon. The women went to the well early in the morning while it was still cool, but this woman was an outcast. She was sick of the whispers, derisive laughter, the taunts from the other women, so they went early and she went at noon by herself. The tired-out Savior and the woman who is tired out by her life.

They meet face to face and something remarkable happens. Jesus asks the woman for a drink. Jews don't have dealings with Samaritans. Rabbis don't even talk to their wives or daughters in public. The barriers begin to come down whenever Jesus is around. Remember the temptation story. Jesus was hungry. Here, he is tired and thirsty. "Give me a drink." The Savior of the world asking, what some called a sinful woman, for a drink.

Consider this this morning, what does Christ need from you? What does Christ need from you that only you can give? Your time, your devotion, your kindness for another person? Maybe Christ needs something else. If I were to write another hymn about this scripture, instead of calling it "Fill My Cup, Lord," I might call it "Empty My Cup, Lord." My cup is so full I have no room for the living water that you offer. Have you ever heard someone say, "My plate's just too full." Have you ever heard that? What they are really saying is "My cup is too full." I don't have room even for God in my life because I am so full of myself.

“Empty my cup, Lord.” Is that the prayer that you need to pray this day? The Good News is that just as Jesus met the woman where she was, so Christ meets us where we are with all of our sinfulness. Did you notice in the scripture that Jesus doesn’t point a finger at her sinfulness? Instead, he lays his healing, compassionate hands on her woundedness and she is transformed. We read in the scripture that she leaves her water jar. There is all kinds of symbolism there. She leaves her water jar and runs to town. “I met a man who told me everything I ever did and he still cared for me and he loved me. Could this be the Messiah?” That’s her testimony. She didn’t say, you have to do this and this, you have to pray, you have to read the Bible, you have to follow these spiritual laws. “I met someone who told me everything I ever did. He knows all there is to know about me, but he still loves me and accepts me. Could this be the Messiah?”

Our challenge, the challenge of our faith, is always these twin pillars: to receive and to share. In order to receive, we need to be empty. Bishop Sheen said, “The great sinners are closer to God than proud intellectuals. Pride swells and inflates the ego. Gross sinners are depressed, deflated, and empty. They, therefore, have room for God. God prefers a loving sinner than to a loveless saint. Love can be trained; pride cannot.”

I know of at least two other persons who have been affected by the woman’s testimony. One of the sad things about this story—did you notice at the end after some of the townspeople hear Jesus for themselves, they say, “We no longer believe because of your testimony.” They were still putting her in her place. We have heard for ourselves, we believe for ourselves. They wouldn’t have heard for themselves if it hadn’t been for her testimony. Who in your life has been a woman at the well who has shared a testimony and introduced you to Christ? How sad. We don’t believe because of your testimony. Of course they believe, especially perhaps one man. Do you remember a story in the Bible about another Samaritan? You remember the story. Jesus told a parable about a man who stopped to help another man who had been beaten and robbed. Legend has it that perhaps the man heard the testimony by the Woman at the Well, and because of her testimony stopped and helped another human being in need.

I know one other person more intimately than the Good Samaritan. This past week, Monday after staff meeting, I returned to my office and the message light on my telephone was blinking. I punched the button and on the other end was a message from a man who was so distraught and crying so hard that I could not understand what he was saying. He composed himself finally and I recognized the voice. The man’s name is Bob Moore. He had been our choir director when we lived in Ponca City. His wife, interestingly enough, was Fran. Fran Moore. Fran had come over to Tulsa a couple of weeks ago, been fine, then developed some flu-like symptoms that have been going around so much. Her primary care physician was here in Tulsa. They came and saw him, and he put her in the hospital because she had developed pneumonia. They put her on antibiotics and she was doing better. Then, a couple of days later, she crashed. She had developed some kind of auto-immune disease. Her white cells were attacking her own lungs and kidneys.

They put her on a respirator for a few days. This past Sunday evening they took her off the respirator and she died almost immediately.

Bob was calling to ask if I could conduct a graveside service at Pawhuska, where Fran was from. He knew about the ethical considerations and I told him that I couldn't really do that but I would go and attend the service and would call the minister at Ponca City and if he wanted me to give a prayer or read a scripture I would do that. I did call the minister at Ponca City. He did not know Bob and Fran because they had not been attending church since he had been there, so he asked me to give the devotion.

One of the things that I said at her service was this: Of all the people I've known in my life, she was one, of a handful of the kindest, sweetest persons I had ever known. She had tasted the living water that Christ offers. She wasn't the kind of person who got up in front and did things the way we need some to do in the church. She taught the children's Kindergarten Sunday School class for years. That was her gift to those children and their parents. She shared her testimony with little children and in so doing introduced them to living water.

The graveside service was Friday afternoon in Pawhuska. It was cold on Friday. When I got to the cemetery it was about 31 degrees and a few snowflakes were falling. The only other person at the cemetery was the man from the funeral home. He and I waited. It would not have been surprising for not many people to show up on a day like that. You might remember one of our favorite sons, Will Rogers, said, "No matter what kind of person you were, the size of the crowd at your funeral would depend upon the weather. Will Rogers was wrong. Several people came out Friday to honor Fran and to be there in support of Bob, his daughter, and his granddaughter. It's not the weather that determines the size of the crowd at your funeral. It's the size of your heart. I'm convinced of that. Fran had one of those hearts that was as large as the world. It was large enough to make room and be empty so she could receive living water from Christ.

The challenge that we face today and always in the church is to empty our cups so we can receive what Christ offers. After we have received it, we are called to share this living water. Amen