

**One Sows and Another Reaps**  
**John 4:1-42**  
**Northminster Presbyterian Church**  
**February 4, 2018**  
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*When we last saw Jesus, he was shaking things up in Jerusalem in his late night visit with a man of the church, Nicodemus. Today, the scene will shift dramatically. For the next two weeks, with me today and Jessica next week, we will explore two of the longest narratives about Jesus in the Bible....two encounters with people who have been made outsiders....next week...the Man Born Blind...today....almost the exact opposite of Nicodemus from last week....hear now the encounter of Jesus and the disciples with the Samaritan Woman at the Well.*

(Text was read.)

Jacob's well, so the tradition goes, was built by the patriarch sometime during the events described in Genesis 33, over 1000 years before today's story at that same well. By Jesus' time, the connection between Jacob and the well was long established. Today's event made the well yet another part of the Holy Land that would be disputed by Christians and Jews for the 2000 years since.

First, some context: Sychar is now known as Nablus, in the center of the Palestinian Territories on the West Bank, and the well is inside of that city. The first religious site over the well was built in the mid 330s CE, when the well became a pool for baptisms in the early Christian church. Late in that century a church was built over the site. It was destroyed by a Samaritan uprising 300 years later. Christian Emperor Justinian rebuilt the church in the 700s but by the time of the crusades in the early 1000s it had been destroyed by Islamic forces controlling the area. The crusaders built yet another church when they were defeated 100 years later and that church was destroyed again. Eight hundred years later, Orthodox Christians built a cathedral over the well and it collapsed in a 1927 earthquake. The current orthodox basilica that sits on the site was finished in 2005.

What on earth would motivate Christians to rebuild five times at that location? Why on earth is this contested spot so important? First, it is the site of the longest conversation recorded between Jesus and any other one person. That alone makes it remarkable. Indeed, it is the conversation where, for the first time in John's gospel, Jesus reveals who he is to someone who isn't already a disciple. And she believes and becomes the first recorded non-Jewish convert, the first non-Jewish evangelist.

It is even more remarkable that this metaphorical living water conversation is with this woman, first because she is a woman, an outsider from the realm of influence and power, and even from religion. Jesus, as a Rabbi, isn't even supposed to talk to her in public—a strange woman not of his family. But there is more. She is a Samaritan, a half-breed heathen. The Samaritans were descended from Abraham and Jacob, but somewhere along the way, through this shift into exile or that conquering outside force, the Samaritans

broke away and their practices and traditions had veered far away from the temple cult that was 1st Century Judaism. She was unclean.

But that wasn't all. Did you notice that it was about noon when Jesus encountered her at the well—the heat of the day. That's not when most women would go to the well. They would be there early in the morning to see and meet their friends and share stories as they helped one another haul the filled pots up out of the well. For some reason, she was not a woman who could have joined in that group. Jesus touches on it when he mentions the five husbands and the fact that she currently resides with a man who is not her husband.

Let's remember, this is the 1st Century. Women don't choose their husbands. They are property and, for whatever reason, this woman is damaged goods. Perhaps she was widowed so many times and still childless so considered a jinx. Perhaps she was passed around by cruel "husbands" so much that she is now so lacking in honor that she must reside in a household without the dignity afforded a wife. The women of the city want nothing to do with her. Society seems to want to have nothing to do with her, except for Jesus who offers her water, water of Spirit and truth. And this water restores her dignity, restores her honor and her personhood. That is what inspires her to rejoin society and give witness to her deliverance. Of course Jesus is speaking in metaphors. It is not really water he offers her at all but the things that water represents....

Some scholars have suggested he offers her freedom from her sinful past but I disagree because we have no evidence of a sinful past. We have evidence of a troubled past, a snake-pit past of broken dreams and lost status. I want to suggest that the living water was intended to fully restore her humanity, her sense of self. "He knows all I have done; he knows all of the tragedies of my life and still he says I am worthy of conversation, of dignity, of life." How odd that Jesus would then immediately, after she wanders off to share this transforming, freeing, loving message of restoration, start talking about food.

Actually, we get a self-care session between Jesus and the disciples about food and Jesus says he doesn't need earthly food so much as spiritual food; that Jesus is fed by the spiritual food of doing the work of the one that sent him. Jesus is fed by the very work that he has just done, the reconciling, saving work of compassion and grace, of freeing the outcast from isolation and restoring her to community and dignity and a strong enough sense of worth that she will head out the door to recruit the very people who shunned her away from morning well visits to come and see.

Is it any wonder Jesus then shifts into another metaphor-laden conversation about the harvest that is all around them, waiting to bear and be the fruits of love and grace and discipleship? It's as if Jesus is saying there are so many who are broken, so many who are isolated, so many who are in desperate need of an act of compassion, an act of restoration, an act of hospitality, so many who need to experience their own dignity, and their own opportunity to live in the gracing light of God's love.

On this day when we celebrate the events of the last year, when we give thanks for all that God is doing here at the corner of Central Park and Harrison and in the places where our ministries reach across our community and around the world, surely we can see what Jesus means. The harvest is bountiful...

We are about to partake of the meal that is a symbol of our being fed on the very life, ministry and resurrection of Jesus. And can't we also see how we have been fed by the work we have joined God's spirit in doing here? Have we not been fed by the knowledge that dozens of children got the right start to the school year with the supplies they needed through our backpack project? Have we not been fed by the ways we see the children of this congregation growing in faith and life as they are given the tools to make faithful loving decisions, to share, to care, to befriend, to stand up for those with less power and resources than they have, all in the name of Jesus Christ? Have we not been fed by hundreds of grateful smiles and hugs of affection as dozens of people in Kentucky experienced what it was like to have a warmer, safer and dryer home? Have we not been fed by the stories of laughter and shared purpose as our young folks participated in food preparation for Feed My Starving Children? Have we not been fed by seeing folks from six to 90 folding bits of paper to create something beautiful with which to worship and honor our God of Peace? And the list goes on and on...

The work of faith is not meant to exhaust us but to feed us as we joyfully, and with a sense of purpose and, yes, even obligation, do the work of being Christ's church here and in the world. It's why I always encourage new members to find a place to fill themselves up here but also a place to pour themselves out for God and for others, because that self-offering paradoxically feeds the soul.

Jesus says when we do that work, his work, we are reaping where others have planted. And look around — our buildings were constructed by two separate generations of members in the late 1920s and again in the early to mid '50s. We daily reap where they have sown as we welcome Al-Anon and the Samaritan Counseling Center and the Boy Scouts and our own beloved Nursery School and Mom's Morning Out children to this beautiful space.

Our new library is almost finished and adults and children of Northminster will reap the fruits of those labors for at least a generation as space is made to learn and grow in the faith, as meetings further Christ's ministry in this place and feed our sense of belonging and family.

The woman at the well and the disciples learned of the freeing power of experiencing a God who knows us better than anyone and loves us into claiming our place as the beloved and the sent, to reap and to sow for a world where love and grace and joy and peace are a powerful anecdote to hatred, self-interest and fear. It requires of us a willingness to offer ourselves and our time, our vulnerability and our love. But it joins us with the almost 100 years of faithful folks who have done that here as we reap where they sowed and as we prepare for the generations to follow who will reap where we have sown.

So, let's to planting. Shall we?