

Living Water
John 4:7-15, 24-29
April 28, 2024
Rev. Leigh Curl-Dove

I spent some time on a plane last weekend, and when that happens I usually use that time to watch movies that have come out recently that I haven't yet seen. So, I watched the musical remake of the iconic 2004 film *Mean Girls*, and then I watched the original *Mean Girls* to see how the remake compared. And I will admit that the original maybe hasn't aged the best, but I still have a soft spot for it.

In the original movie, Amy Poehler plays Regina George's mom. Amy's character tries to live vicariously through her very popular high school daughter and her group of friends. When the viewers first meet Amy's character in the film she says, "I'm not like a regular mom, I'm a cool mom." And as I watched the movie last weekend and began to laugh at Amy Poehler's line, I realized that I say the exact same thing to people when they ask me what I do for a living—if I decide I actually want to tell the truth and engage that conversation on that particular day.

"I'm a pastor, but I'm not like a regular pastor. I'm a cool pastor."

"I am a pastor, but I'm not that kind of pastor."

And maybe you do it too when people find out that you go to church, "well, we're not that kind of church."

When I do this, I want to make sure people know that I am not the type of pastor or Christian who uses the name of God to commit harm, to push my own agenda, to try and take away fundamental human rights from the LGBTQIA+ community and other marginalized groups. But even still I know that when people find out I am a Christian or a pastor, many of them will be apprehensive and rightfully so.

I imagine the Samaritan woman felt apprehensive as she approached Jesus, a Jewish man at the well. We hear it in her response to Jesus when he tells her to give him a drink. She asks, "How is it that you a Jewish man ask a drink of me a Samaritan woman?"

On the one level, you have a gender dynamic at play. Women were really supposed to be seen and not heard. Women really weren't supposed to interact with men outside of their immediate family. The Samaritan woman likely just wanted to get her water with no problems and get back home to get on with the household chores.

And then on another level, you have geographic and religious boundaries at play—a longstanding feud between these two people groups. The feud between the Israelites and the Samaritans goes back many, many years, and it is a family feud. Samaritans descended from the northern kingdom of Israel while the Jewish people descended from the southern kingdom of

Judah, which makes their feud all the more painful and perhaps makes each side dig their heels in harder. The feud began over true and false worship, with the Jewish people worshipping in the temple in Jerusalem and the Samaritans worshipping on Mount Gerizim. But like most feuds, it had spiraled and now the groups did their best to have nothing to do with each other, with each side making assumptions about the other. And in an empire that divided groups and limited their power, the Samaritans had the least.

So when the Samaritan woman walked up to the well and saw a Jewish man sitting there, I imagine she must have been very worried about what might transpire. And we can hear it in this question, the skepticism, the confusion, the caution--“How is that you, a Jewish man, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan woman?”

And instead of answering her question, Jesus says, “If you really knew who I was you would have instead asked me for living water.” It seems like a game she can’t win. This man is speaking to her in riddles. And she likely doesn’t want to prolong this interaction any longer than it needs to be. But instead of rolling her eyes, getting her own water, and heading home, she is intrigued and asks about the living water.

Jesus tells her that the water she is about to draw from the well, will never fully quench her thirst, she will have to come back again and again to refill her bucket. But the living water that he gives will quench her thirst. This water is no ordinary water, but when drunk becomes a gushing spring of eternal life.

“Sir, give me this water! I need this water, so that I may never thirst again,” the woman says.

And in the verses we didn’t read this morning, Jesus says something to her that once again, take the woman aback. And this time it’s because Jesus knows about her life, he knows that she has had multiple husbands and that her current partner is not her husband. But Jesus doesn’t say it as an accusation. Jesus doesn’t say it to shame or condemn. Jesus says it because he sees her. Jesus says it because he knows her.

When Jesus says this, the woman incorrectly assumes that Jesus is nothing more than a prophet—how else could he know those things about her? And Jesus tries again to get her to understand, explaining to her true worship and that now is the time to return to the true worship of God. She thinks she understands and says, “I know the Messiah is coming, and he will proclaim all things to us.”

The New Revised Standard Version updated edition, which is the text translation we read today, translates Jesus’ response to the woman poorly. It says, “I am he,” which lessens the impact and significance of this moment between Jesus and the woman. What Jesus actually says is, “I am.” Jesus is not just revealing himself to be the Messiah, but is claiming the title of God—the exact same name that God uses when speaking to Moses out of the burning bush. The Samaritan Woman is the first person in John’s Gospel to behold Jesus as God.

This is not the first time that a woman, specifically a woman of a minority group or a marginalized group, has encountered the God who sees her and knows her. This is not the first time that a woman has been *the first* to encounter this God. Nor is it the first time that this has happened by water.

In Genesis, the young enslaved girl Hagar flees from her mistress Sarah after being forced to conceive a child with Sarah's husband Abraham. God finds Hagar by a spring of water in the wilderness, and says "Hagar, where have you come from and where are you going?" It is there by a spring of water that God makes a covenant with Hagar that she will be the mother of a great nation, her offspring will be so greatly multiplied that they cannot be counted for multitude.

Hagar gives God a name by the spring. She is the first person in the Bible to name God, and she names God, "El Roi," meaning "God of seeing," because it was there by that spring that Hagar both saw God and was seen by God.

Later in Hagar's story, she is in the wilderness again. This time because she has been cast out with her son. As she wanders in the wilderness, thirsty and hungry, at her wit's end certain that both she and her son would die. She meets God again. God had heard the cries of her son and again came to her, calling her by name, "What troubles you Hagar? Do not be afraid." God reminds her of the covenant God had made with her years ago and opens her eyes to a well of water—a promise that she and her child would be okay.

It is by deep wells and gushing springs of living water that God reveals Godself, and more often than not it is to the people that we still least expect even though God has shown time and time again that God reveals Godself to the least, the last, and the left out. Time and time again it is women like Hagar and the Samaritan woman that show us who God is and how to drink from the living water that is offered to each and every-body.

I tend to decide my favorite hymns based on which ones I can't get through without shedding a tear. Odds are if a hymn chokes me up or makes my eyes water, it is counted among my favorites. The hymns that are my favorites are the ones where we proclaim the love of God and we proclaim that we are fully seen and known. These are my favorites because they don't just remind us of those truths, but they call us and commit us to living those truths.

"I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say," which we sang a couple weeks ago, is one of those hymns for me. The second verse goes like this:

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"Behold I freely give
the living water, thirsty one;
stoop down and drink and live."
I came to Jesus, and I drank
of that life-giving stream;
my thirst was quenched, my soul revived,

and now I live in him.

The living water is freely given to all who are thirsty. The living water flows from the spring in the wilderness where God sees Hagar, down to the Red Sea where God parts the waters for the fleeing Israelites, through the Jordan river where John baptizes Jesus, up from the well in Samaria where the Samaritan woman is the first to behold Jesus as God, and it is still flowing.

The living water never stops flowing, the deep well of living water never runs dry, the gushing spring of living water never dries up, it never stops flowing, always reviving the driest lands and quenching the weariest throats. It is there and will always be there—for you, for me, for the Hagar, for the Samaritan women, for every-body.

Once we drink of that life-giving stream, once we taste that fount of every blessing, once we wade in the water—God troubles the water, the current catches us and we can never go back to the way things were. Our thirst is quenched, our souls are revived, and our hearts are tuned to sing God's grace—grace and welcome for all. Streams of mercy, never ceasing. For all.