

Lent III
Jn 4.5-42
February 24, 2008
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Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well?

In + Nomine Patris

Just a few minutes before High Noon; the sun beat down like a welder's blowtorch; if there had BEEN any sidewalk you could've fried an egg on it. Her dusty feet burning on the hot, packed earth, her eyes downcast, the woman approached the well, longing for the chilled, clear water she would draw out to quench her parched throat.

She was a bit startled to hear a man's voice address her: "Give me a drink." Looking up sharply she saw a stranger resting there on the well rim, and gazing directly at HER!

There were the tell-tale phylacteries and the blue-white prayer shawl – obviously he was a Jew; and yet he met her eyes directly and kindly; not the usual Jewish behavior toward the DOUBLY DISTAINED: a Samaritan, and a WOMAN to boot. She knew and expected his contempt. ALL HER LEARNED RESPONSES welled up in her instantly: the responses both of shame and anger – racial and gender bigotry, the intolerance of a Jew for a Samaritan, of a man for a woman, assumed superiority, enforced division, refusal to meet eye with eye, they made her ashamed of who she was, made her wish she could hide herself. And THAT made her BOIL inside as the midday sun could never do: "If only I could get back at him for treating me so; I would revenge myself on them all; I'd show them what I'm made of!"

These were conditioned responses the instant elicited from her, and she knew their sinful nature; and yet somehow the stranger took them away as instantly as he had aroused them; by his look, by his tone, by the very request he made of her, "Do me a kindness, give me a drink." As she felt her worst fears strangely melt away, she asked with unfeigned curiosity: "How is it that YOU ask a drink of me?" How odd, she thought; why is this man different from other Jews, from other men? The strange Jew answered, in human and humane tones: "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. Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst."

Well, now he had her interest: "If I knew who he was..." Who is he? What gift can he be offering? He hasn't even got a bucket! "Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well? I want this water, so that I shall not thirst again!"

And again, ALL HER LEARNED RESPONSES welled up in her instantly: the responses of covetousness, desire, possession, laziness: Not to have come to this well again in the burning heat; not to have to haul water for that dead beat man back home. Perhaps I could OWN it, so that I could CHARGE for it, this living water, and nobody would have it but me!" She could hardly conceal her excitement: "Sir, give me this water that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."

Who, whoo! A better investment than houses in Charleston!

But her dream scheme melted away like butter when this very important Jew spoke again. "Go, call your husband and come here."

Have you ever felt your stomach drop when you know they're on to you? She did.

For the 3rd time ALL HER LEARNED RESPONSES welled up in her instantly:

the responses of guilt, evasion, denial. Oh no! he can't find out about my behavior. So I'll just say, "I have no husband" The all-seeing, important Jew before her smiled with something like HUMOR as he said, "You are right in saying "I have no husband," for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband." Was that a wry twinkle she saw in his eye? The woman stared down at her bare scorched feet, feeling a scorching of soul as well. "He knows it all," she thought aghast. "I've had relationships with more men than most women meet." I need to change the subject now.

"Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. So let's talk about religion! We believe in praying at Mt. Gerazim, but you all think that Jerusalem is the one True Church." She almost congratulated herself on such a smooth segue. Now we can argue this! Until she heard his gentle and non-combative answer, "The true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeketh such to worship him"

And she realized that it had ALL failed, her learned responses, her pride and prejudice, her deadly-sinful self, even all her disguises.

"He told me everything I ever did. He has unlocked the secret places of my soul, and shown me the broken edges of my life."

HE HAS SHOWN ME MY HUMANITY, scarred and broken, scratched and dented, and yet without making me feel shame or fear.

HERE is something different.

HERE is something new.

Could this somehow be the Messiah, the One we have hoped for, here in our midst?

The woman looked up at the Stranger, the Man, the Jew - and she felt her understanding of him was somehow GROWING - Jew, Prophet, Messiah? Even as she recognized her own self-understanding to be growing: Sinner, Woman, Human, forgiven and uncondemned, even LOVED, despite her failings, despite her sin.

Was THIS what a Messiah was like? She felt something different, something NEW welling up now within her. She looked him straight in the eye, almost in recognition, feeling almost fed, and given to drink, by this Person, this Presence before her. She said, "I know that Messiah is coming, he who is called Christ; when he comes he will show us all things." She did not add her unspoken thought, "Just as you have shown me to myself." The Stranger, the Jew, this Prophet, yea, even this Messiah, looked her straight in the eye, and said a thing she would KNOW to be blasphemy had it not been THIS ONE who said it: "I who speak to you am he." The very Name of God, which even Prophets did not say lightly: I am he. I AM.

"Is the LORD among us or not?" her ancestors had querulously asked at Massah and Meribah, in the desert, even as Moses struck the Rock and the Living Waters flowed out for the people to drink.

"Is the LORD among us or not?" And she had seen him and heard his answer,

I AM.