

A Questionable Dialogue

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on March 8th, 2026 – John 4:5-30, 39-42)

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In the heat of the day, along dusty roads, an unnamed woman makes her way to Jacob's well, to get her daily supply of water.

At the same time a stranger and his friends are making their way through enemy territory in Samaria. He stops at the well whilst his friends go further on into the town to get some food.

The woman is a Samaritan, one of the group of people who do not get on with the Jews, they believe in the same God and even share an understanding that the Messiah is coming to liberate them all. They do however differ on where one should worship God – the Samaritans say on the mountain, the Jews say in Jerusalem.

We know the story, the woman is alone because she is an outcast in her town, we do not really know why, but it has something to do with her current living arrangements. She is not married to her current partner, and has been married many times before – perhaps she has been divorced or widowed or both. The rest of the women view her as cursed, unlucky or just immoral. She cannot risk meeting them at the well and putting up with the snide remarks and stares. That is why she makes the trek in the heat of the day.

What follows is a questionable dialogue. Questionable in the sense that, these people come from such different worlds that they probably shouldn't even be interacting with each other. Questionable in the sense that many questions are asked. This dialogue, conversation, encounter begins with a seemingly innocent question – would you mind getting me a drink and ends with Jesus revealing who he was, what he was offering both the woman and indeed the world and with this unnamed woman returning to her community encouraging them to come and meet Jesus and listen to what he has to say. The first apostle, the first missionary!

However, there is so much more to the story than that.

Jews and Samaritans were absolute enemies, you would not travel through Samaria as a Jew unless you absolutely had to, never let alone strike up a conversation with one, and a woman to boot. So already we see Jesus breaking down barriers.

Added to that, the woman is also ostracised from her own community of Samaritans, that is why she is at the well in the middle of the day, she is not part of the community, she is an outsider presumably because of her questionable living arrangements.

Today is International Women's Day and how appropriate that we have from the lectionary a reading about a woman on the margins of society, a woman who has much to teach us about faith, about who Jesus is and what life in him offers.

The conversation begins with an innocent request for a drink. The unnamed woman reminds Jesus of just how different they are. Jesus continues and says if you really knew who I was, you would be asking me for water, and the water I would give you would lead to eternal life. Staying on safe ground she takes him literally and points out

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he would not be able to give her water as he doesn't even have a bucket with him. Jesus continues and little by little she engages with him about what he really means, and states she would love some of this water which would mean she would never be thirsty, no doubt thinking, she wouldn't have to journey to the well in the midst of the heat of the day. Before she knows it the conversation changes, and she finds herself sharing with him honestly about her situation, Jesus in turn reveals much about himself and God. She knows a bit of theology and at the end wonders if this stranger might be the Messiah for whom they await. Jesus responds, you got it, I am he. Her response, she forgets why she is even at the well (even leaving her water jar behind), and runs back to the community from which she is ostracised to tell them all about the encounter.

What about Jesus and this encounter gives her the courage to do that? I think a number of things that happen in this encounter give her the courage.

First, Jesus sees her and engages with her as a fellow human being. He listens to her and gently leads her to deeper understandings.

Second, something in the way that he listens to her, gives her the courage to be honest with him. There is no condemnation, no judgement, just love and acceptance.

Third, he reveals something of himself to her. He ultimately confirms her suspicions that he is indeed the long-awaited Messiah.

Finally, he does offer her the water of life. Not physical water, but the elixir of life – the overflowing fountain of forgiveness, of acceptance, of love, of mercy which leads to freedom. Freedom for her to throw off her shame, throw off her inferiority complex and share all she has experienced with everyone, even those who have treated her badly.

So, what might we take from this story on a personal, communal and global level?

We individually and corporately are called to follow Jesus, to break open barriers that threaten to divide. We are called to really see and accept others. We are called to dialogue with each other about our differences with a view to understand where the other is coming from. We are called to show those on the margins dignity and to offer to them all that will enrich their lives, to free them from whatever binds them.

We have a significant war unfolding around us, and this story teaches about how we should treat our enemies. Jesus teaches us that we should accept those who are different to us culturally, religiously and socially. We should enter into dialogue with each other, we should treat each other with respect and kindness. We should listen to them and show them dignity. In so doing we will all find freedom, freedom to love, freedom to live.

My friend Digby Hannah wrote a song called 'Deeper River', one of the verses is

Hear the call to thirsty people, there's no need to thirst again

To the weary come beside still waters lie

Full of goodness, full of mercy, our cup will overflow

When the call of that deep river, is a voice we've come to know.

This to me sums up the story we have before us today.

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An unnamed woman from the margins of society experiences the eternal life that Jesus brings – life in all its fulness, where she knows herself to be loved, accepted and truly seen. Go out and share that kind of life with all the strangers that you will encounter in coming days. Amen.