

Exodus 17:3-7
Romans 5:1-2, 5-8
John 4:5-42

*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.*

(Horatio Bonar, 1846)

These are the words of a beautiful hymn based on the gospel lesson today that comes to us from John's account. This is a conversion story and appropriate for our reflection in this Lenten Season.

This is the longest and most Spirit-filled conversation found in all four gospel accounts. It does not begin with God-talk but rather with the basic shared human experience of weariness, hunger, and thirst. Jesus stoops down, so to speak, and very much wants to share in that woman's life. She is surprised, she is cautious, she experiences for the first time or the first in a long time, a genuine human being.

Apparently, she has been avoiding the women of the village, since she came to Jacob's Well at high noon. She tolerates the heat of the day rather than endure the judgmental eyes and tongues of the other women at the usual drawing time of morning or evening. At that perfect moment in time, Jesus is also resting at the well. Without any means to draw water for himself, he asks the woman to draw him some water and quench his thirst. This is the perfect lead into her life situation. There are no judgmental women around and Jesus has sent his disciples on an errand.

This encounter would never have happened if Jesus had not been such a radical and free individual, breaking taboos and crossing boundaries. As he asks the woman for a drink he crosses gender, national, religious, and moral boundaries. He was one free individual...humbly admitting his exhaustion and asking a despised woman for a drink. The disciples are even surprised to find him with a woman and there is a hint of disapproval. By the time John

wrote his gospel toward the end of the first century, Samaria was recognized as the first region beyond Jerusalem to receive the good news. Samaria had moved from being a despised people with "no husband" to being "betrothed" to Christ. Here Jesus planted seeds that would bear abundant fruit and eternal life. An intelligent and daring woman is at the center of this shocking inclusiveness that we are still working toward in the church today.

Again, a very important point to be noted here is that Jesus was one free individual and those who would respond to him and his teaching would share in his freedom. This despised woman who was avoiding the other judgmental women of her village now runs into her village. She was no longer ashamed of the story of her life because she now had a more urgent story to tell. This man lowered a bucket into her soul and drew up the deep living water within her. The story she told was compelling enough that the village came to Jesus.

There is in this account of John's gospel a litany of names for Jesus. First the woman speaks to him as a "Jew" and then a "prophet." As she hesitates to call him "Messiah" or "Christ," Jesus reveals himself as the one anointed with the Holy Name, "I AM." And finally, after the people of the village come to him and he stays with them, they name him "Savior of the World."

I would suggest above all he is wisdom, compassion, and love! He sought the woman at the well and he seeks you and me, not to judge us, but to invite us to share in his freedom!