

“Love: Life-Lifting Power”

John 4:3-14

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I invite you to use your own ‘spiritual imagination’ about our Scripture reading. Be creative about an unnamed Samaritan woman’s encounter story with Jesus and read it not as an ancient Israelite’s story but yours. Imagine as if you were a Samaritan who met Jesus at Jacob’s well and experienced a life-changing moment. What was *that*? According to the reading, a Samaritan woman offered a drink to Jesus and Jesus gave her ‘living water’. What does it mean to drink ‘living water’ that will never make us be thirsty? How might this story challenge us, especially, claiming ‘the living water’ in our everyday lives?

I am now going to share my spiritual imagination about our Scripture story. Don’t see me as your Pastor, but think of me a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well.

(Monologue tone) The Bible didn’t record my name. So I am unnamed Samaritan woman. Most Jews regard me and my people Samaritans as dirty, half-breeds and the wrong religion. Simply speaking, they think that we are bad people. I live in the West bank, Palestine region. Jews are afraid that my town is not safe so they always bypass my town. I feel that I am isolated and segregated. But anyhow I live here... Here I come to Jacob’s well everyday to get a bucket of water. This is my daily routine. This is the only place where I can have water in my town. I walk over here by myself because I don’t have any friends. No one wants to be friends with me. I guess that people have heard about me. To tell you truth, I was discarded, divorced and rejected by men five times. Maybe men are afraid that I am a divorced woman and they think of me as damaged goods. I feel that I am not worthy. Many times, I feel lonely, deeply wounded in my heart and disappointed in me about my relationship failures. To be honest with you, I prefer to come to the well by myself because I don’t want to meet other women. Actually, just in case I carry rocks in my backpack to protect myself from unexpected dangers and attack from angry men. I am sad, but these rocks are signs of my anger, bitterness, hurt and failures. Honestly, I have deep pain and brokenness in me. I want to acknowledge that to you. But no one has come and listened to my story except Jesus, a Jewish man. He was a different Jew than any other guy that I have ever met. He was special.

What do you think of this Samaritan's depth of pain and brokenness? You don't need to show your pity to this Samaritan woman. That is not the main point of our story. This story doesn't require us of pity and sympathy for this woman but rather this whole story challenges us to discover our own stories of pain, failures and feelings. No one is perfect without any issues. Everybody has a deep spiritual hunger, a desperate need of saving grace and a thirst of living water in our own depth of pain and brokenness. In our reading, the Samaritan woman is not a passive and low-self esteemed person. Rather she seems to be confident and assertive in her theological debate with Jesus. She might be one of the leaders among the Samaritans. The purpose of this story in the Gospel of John is not written for the purpose of sharing a particular person's personal life for your information in ancient Samaria. Rather we need to see the portrait of our own life challenges such as isolation, failures, anger, fear of feelings of loneliness and discover God's active grace to help us overcome these challenges. In our Scripture story, the Samaritan woman experienced a life changing moment in her encounter with Jesus at the well. What happened to her? What was the most important thing that she has missed and desperately desired to seek to fulfill her life?

It was love. The Samaritan woman experienced the love of God through meeting with Jesus at Jacob's well. What Jesus showed and shared with her was all about love and she felt the love as life-lifting power. The encounter with Jesus has changed the Samaritan woman's whole life. Only God can change her life and only love can do that. Jesus was different from other male Jews. He carefully listened to her story, paid close attention to her life journey and gave her living water for eternal life. Jesus didn't care about her religious background, cultural identity and embraced her failures. The Samaritan woman comfortably shared her pain and brokenness and was able to let go of the heavy weight. What Jesus did was love without any condition. Truly God is unconditional love with no bounds. Ironically, this encounter was Jesus' first one in which he revealed his true identity as the Messiah in the Gospel of John. The key point in this story was that love lifted up the Samaritan woman's life and made her feel that she is accepted and embraced by the love of God.

Through our life's journey, we carry our own rock. In a sense, we are an unnamed Samaritan woman who holds depths of pain, brokenness, anger and hurt around with us. Sometimes we tempt to give up on ourselves due to the heavy weight, but we can't do it on our own. Who will help us take off the backpack and let go of the weight? Only God's active grace and mercy can free our burdens from us. Only love can do that and our God will not give up on us.

I want to share a story with you.

A young lady confidently walked around a conference room while leading and explaining stress management to an audience with a raised glass of water. Everyone knew she was going to ask the ultimate question, 'half empty or half full?'... She fooled them all "How heavy is this glass of water?" she inquired with a smile. Answers called out ranged from 8 oz.to 20 oz. She replied , "The absolute weight doesn't matter. It depends on how long I hold it. If I hold it for a minute, that's not a problem. If I hold it for an hour, I'll have an ache in my right arm. If I hold it for a day, you'll have to call an ambulance. In each case it's the same weight, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes." She continued, "and that's the way it is with stress. If we carry our burdens all the time, sooner or later, as the burden becomes increasingly heavy, we won't be able to carry on."

The Samaritan woman has kept her pain and brokenness to herself because she had no friends and companions around her. Jesus was the only one who helped her experience of being understood, accepted and loved. And she finally experienced God's active grace and love to liberate her from her guilt, fear and any bondage in her life. God did it for her and she experienced the love of God and the power of love in Jesus. Don't hold your pain and brokenness in yourself but turn yourself to God asking for God's mercy and grace to take away your heavy burdens. Give your full trust in Jesus.

A poem, "Footprint in the sand" composed by Mary Stevenson is my favorite and most inspiring story. It always reminds me of God's caring love. The story goes like this: One night, in a dream, a person is walking on a beach with God. They leave two sets of footprints in the sand behind them. Looking back, the tracks seem to represent various stages of this person's life. At some point along the way the two trails dwindle to one, especially at the lowest and most hopeless moments of that person's life. When questioning God, believing that God must have abandoned his follower during those times, God gives the explanation: 'During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you'.

Everyone has a deep hunger for love, salvation, a deep craving for forgiveness and hope to move forward in their lives. We always try to be perfect and work out our problems, issues and challenges in our lives. But many times, we realize that the harder we try to be perfect, the deeper we realize that we have emptiness that we can't fill up on our own. Only God can fill up our emptiness. Only God's love can fulfill our needs. Do you experience the love of God in your daily lives?

The Samaritan woman had been looking for something to fill the emptiness in her heart, but hadn't found it yet. Jesus gave her water that made her thirsty no more. Truly, living water is not edible or drinkable material but a spiritual

gift of full acceptance and forgiveness to heal her wounded heart. We all need *that* living water!! As the Dalai Lama, a Tibet Buddhist master says, “Love is the absence of judgment.” Mother Teresa also says, “The most terrible poverty is loneliness, and the feeling of being unloved.”¹ In the discourse with the Samaritan woman, Jesus offered a new relationship and a deeper level of new friendship.

I imagine the Samaritan woman’s exciting and joyful heart after she found a new spiritual friendship with God through Jesus. I am reminded of a song, “You’ve got a friend in me” from the Toy Story movie, Randy Newman’s music. May Jesus could have sung this song to her:

You've got a friend in me (x2)
When the road looks rough ahead
And you're miles and miles from your nice warm bed
You just remember what your old pal said
Girl, you've got a friend in me
Yeah, you've got a friend in me

You've got a friend in me (x2)
You've got troubles, and I've got 'em too
There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you
We stick together and can see it through
'Cause you've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me

Jesus our Christ is offering us the living water as our friend and companion. I hope that you will accept him as your Messiah and drink that water which will never make you thirsty again now and forever. Amen.

¹ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/50997-the-most-terrible-poverty-is-loneliness-and-the-feeling-of>
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