“...Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep...”

I have been thinking about buckets this week. We’re not really sure who invented the bucket. The earliest buckets or pails were probably made of hollowed out gourds and then from dried animal skins. Over time buckets and pails have been made from various materials – wood, metal, bronze, leather, and plastic to name some of the materials.

A bucket is one of the most useful items in everyday life. From helping to keep a house clean to carrying water to gardens or animals to creating wonderful sand castles on the beach, a bucket or a pail is a necessity.

Probably my earliest memory of a bucket is ‘bucket-feeding a calf” – meaning pouring milk in a bucket and trying to hold the bucket for a young calf as they slurp and head-butt the bucket trying to make sure they got more in their mouths and down to their tummy than on the ground or on me.

Another memory I associate with buckets is carrying a 5-gallon water bucket or pail full of water on my head from the river to the homes when I lived in Nicaragua. I never was quite as graceful as the girls and women who had been doing this all of their lives and I often had some on my clothes while they would be dry as a bone.

“Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep”, says the woman to Jesus stating the obvious.
What you claim is impossible, she is saying.\(^1\)
Doubt radiates from her words.
From her perspective, Jesus has nothing to accomplish his task.
Nothing to capture water in to give her “life-giving water”.
Certainly this unknown man,
not of her community or line of heritage,
has nothing she can see that could give her water
let alone what she would need to break down the barriers that separated men and women,
Jews and Samaritans and herself from her community.

In ancient times, men and women did not converse casually on the roads or at the wells.
Nor did Jewish Israel accept Samaria and it’s inhabitants because of the inter-marriages during an Assyrian exile.
These were broad social and culture constraints this woman at the well would have had no hope, perhaps not even a thought, of changing.

And, this woman has a past.
She is at the well in the heat of the day.
Scholars largely agree that there has been some rupture in her belonging and acceptance with the townspeople, her community, which causes her to come to the well at this time of day.

We learn from the gospel that she has had several husbands and she is living with another man, though he is not her husband.
So great was this woman’s pain and fear at interacting with others that she endures the sun at it’s highest.
The scars from life never heal when they are constantly picked at and reopened.

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In the social hierarchy of the times,
this woman would be pretty low on the list and
is likely without protection nor has too many friends.

I don’t know about you, but I think
this woman’s personal, figurative bucket probably
feels like it has a hole in it.
She is parched and weary.
She longs for healing grace.

Sir, Ma’am: You have no bucket and the well is deep
could be a truth statement about some situations
we face in our lives.
About some situations that
require more than we can possibly give.

Like standing at the bedside of someone with
Gliobastoma-type brain cancer.

Or when you see a beloved friend aging and
it becomes apparent that living alone and
managing their affairs is not the best option for them.

Or when you watch a friend go through a divorce.

Or when your young friend and mother dies of breast cancer.

Or when you see a friend deep in
depression and nothing you say helps.

Or when your spouse spirals out of control and
gambles away or drinks up any economic security.

Or when you cry, how long, O Lord, about
your situation and
nothing seems to change.
There are situations we face where we feel without a bucket or maybe there is a bucket, but there are so many situations of suffering and pain, so many people who need miracles, that it feels as though what I can give is like “a drop in the bucket” – an infinitesimal contribution and it can’t possibly make a difference in the grand scheme of things.

But Jesus gives us another perspective on those times when our lives and the life around us seem to require more than we can offer, when our buckets spring leaks or are too heavy for us to carry.

First, when we get tired and thirsty, It’s ok to stop. It’s ok to sit down and rest. It’s ok to ask for help during these times. And, when we do, Jesus is there with living water. The kind of water that plugs the leak in our bucket, dispels our doubt, quenches our thirst, fills us up and gives us strength. Strength like the woman received to run to her townspeople and bring many to Jesus.

Second, following Jesus’ example: don’t avoid the hard stuff. Jesus did not travel around Samaria, as many Jewish people would have done in his day so; don’t avoid the hard situations, confrontations or places in life. In fact, refreshing water and healing grace from one assumed to be opposed to her filled her bucket, rinsed the scars of her heart and her life and restored her to health and community.

Third, Jesus was present for this woman
who had no hope of repairing her reputation or regaining a place in the community.
Part of the reason we can endure the hard places is because Jesus accompanies us when we are despairing.
Because Jesus transforms us,
wrings water from the rocky road,
brings blossoms in the desert.

Finally, reconciliation and restoration is possible with God.
It doesn’t matter what has happened,
what side of God you have found yourself on,
or what you have done in your life.

God is bigger than:
Your past
Your pain
Your fear
Your scars
Your hate
Your doubt
This World. ²

Thanks be to God. Amen.

² ELCA Facebook page. 3.22.14