

A Deep Thirst for Something Better

John 4:5-19

As often happens in many families, I have a niece who has broken her parents' hearts. Wendy and I were with her about a month ago when we were in Florida and our niece came to have dinner with the entire family. At the time, she was doing well—she was in the second year of employment at a local hotel (the longest she has ever held a job), she was living not too far away with her boyfriend (with whom we were not particularly enamored), and she seemed relatively happy—as much as a twenty-something might be visiting with family.

Our niece, who I'll call Mary, is a real charmer—attractive, gregarious, a delight to behold with an engaging personality and appealing sense of humor. We really enjoyed her company for as long as she was able to be with us. We don't see her very often, but I know she has had a tough go of it. Up until a year or two ago, she was often up and down, in and out of jobs, involved with heavy drinking and drug use, and often getting herself into trouble. She seemed destined to live a hard life, as some people do, which is a shame, since my brother and sister-in-law have been good parents.

Still, Mary was adopted from Russia along with her sister when she was 9-years-old and, though it seemed like everything could work out well, once she reached her late teens and early twenties, her childhood experience in the orphanage in Siberia (and, I suppose, her genes) seemed to hold sway over her outlook and attitude. She barely got out of high school and once out never seemed to fit in anywhere except with a fairly rough crowd. She left the household in which she

was reared and stayed away from her family for a while. That seemed to be her chosen destiny until a year or two ago when she turned things around, settled down, and started to get her act together.

That's the way she was up until a couple of weeks ago, when Mary showed up late and lost her job; with no money to pay her rent, she abandoned her apartment with all her belongings (including much of what she received from her parents), and left town with her boyfriend. After a few days away and with no money, they returned and began their stay, freeloading on his single mother, without jobs and without much apparent ambition. At present, that's where things stand and my brother and wife are at a loss for what they can do to makes things better, without enabling this kind of behavior to continue.

I feel their pain. I've known many individuals over the years who have taken similar tracks in lives punctuated by more failures than successes, more setbacks than accomplishments. If I ask for a show of hands, I would imagine a number of us know of or experience a similar situation. It's hard to see people, especially those we love, continue to sabotage themselves with poor decisions, less than responsible behavior, and an attitude that doesn't appear to care or express much ambition toward changing for the better. They seem to be satisfied (and able) to function on a subsistence level, getting by from day to day only by the grace and mercy of others, instead of their own motivation to improve themselves.

Unfortunately, they are often dismissed by others as hopeless—people we give up on because of their chronic behavior. Even the most kind-hearted become jaded trying to bail out those who don't

really help themselves. My brother and sister-in-law have tried to provide support within appropriate limits. They've done all they can do, even though their love for Mary will never let them go.

As I said, many of us are acquainted with similar situations. Because we care, we don't easily give up even if we don't know what to do—even if we don't have much hope that they'll ever find something better. Troubled people tend to be like Sisyphus on steroids!

Perhaps for that reason, it's easy to become callous and critical of problem-plagued people—those who consistently find themselves in bad places, having made foolish choices, or having taken regrettable actions—situations that become high maintenance and problematic for those around them. If there was a way to do an MRI of our souls, we'd see it plainly: all the fractures, scars, and lesions of resentment, anger, and complaints evident just below the surface of our public skin. All of this comes to the surface in how we communicate with the ones who break our hearts and how we characterize them.

Unfortunately, they know that. Troubled people recognize they're a disappointment to others who want them to be something more than they are. The tension in the relationship is uncomfortable and awkward for everyone if they can't seem to straighten out their lives. It's easier to stay away and avoid it all together than to hear the carping and complaints of those who have given up on them. It's sad—sad and frustrating for everyone.

All of these elements of a troubled life show up in this story of the Samaritan woman—a life that had gotten so messed up with chronic misgivings that it was easier to avoid people than face their

gossip and disdain. As the story goes, in the middle of the day, Jesus sent his disciples into town for some food while he sat and cooled himself beside the well. While there, he observed a Samaritan woman coming to the well to draw her daily water. On the surface, it might seem insignificant. Who cares what time of day a person goes to get water? Except in the context of this story, it made everything painfully clear.

You see, the custom in Mediterranean climates was to draw water in the coolest parts of the day—early in the morning soon after dawn and then shortly before dusk. At those times, the women of the village would gather around the well and catch up on the day’s news (cf., the proverbial “watercooler”). It was a practical need and a social custom carried out daily in every village throughout Palestine (it still holds true in many traditional cultures).

So, for this woman to be at the well during the heat of the day, tells us something was amiss. This Samaritan woman was hoping to avoid the social chatter. She came for her water at a time when, presumably, there was no one else to encounter.

Jesus intuitively picked up on those cues. In an effort to engage her, he asked her for a drink which, when you think about it, may have startled her and initially made the situation relatively awkward. But maybe she realized that he was not from the village, she responded, safely assuming that this stranger knew nothing about her.

That’s the beauty of new relationships—people who don’t know your history can be introduced on fresh new terms that you can control. A first impression is a gift to someone who has much to hide.

You've yearned for relationships that weren't already complicated by your past. You can put on your best face, your most appealing nature, your likeable, affable character. That's in contrast to those who already know your story—those who judge you harshly, leaving you defensive, cautious, and very much alone. So a new acquaintance offers another chance, allowing you the freedom to be yourself.

I assume, that's what it must have been like for this Samaritan woman. She was an outcast in her village and she was yearning for a fresh start. Jesus even offered her something he called, "living water", which she may have thought was another spring outside of the village where she could draw her water at a cooler and more comfortable time of day.

However, it really wasn't a different environment that she needed, as much as it was a remedy for her pain—her hidden hurt. Every day she came to the well for water reminded her, not only of her isolation and her desire for a fresh start, but also her deep thirst for something better.

So in an effort to help her name her pain, Jesus confronted her self-deception to unmask her shame. He asked her to go and bring back her husband. Reflexively, her response was she had none. Was it because she was hoping this stranger might take interest in her and whisk her away from her village of pain? Perhaps. Or was it because she didn't want Jesus to penetrate her personal life, since it would only invite further investigation and she'd be exposed for who she was? Her lack of candor was her best protection from scrutiny and judgment.

Jesus, though, penetrated the emotional shell and correctly diagnosed her condition—she had been married five times and her present lover was only a live-in. In those times, a woman had no rights or standing in a divorce and thus, she would have married again simply for the sake of economic security, with or without love. All that didn't seem to matter for her life was a mess and this stranger somehow—perhaps by reputation alone—knew all about her. Apparently, word had spread all the way to Judea about her troubled, pathetic existence.

Now, a reputation is thought to be a fair estimation of a person, but often it is not. Information about an individual can be true or false—accurate or inaccurate—bandied about that may or may not be grounded in fact, for better or for worse. From a distance, people think they know someone, as if they comprehend the motivation and soul of that person, when all they are capable of doing is measuring a person by their own standards. They see what they want to see and presume to know what they care to know. That isn't fair, for to actually *know* someone, you must be able to empathize with them and understand them for who they truly are and what they've been through. People who coldly judge others lack empathy and understanding. That's why it's wise not to accept a critic's judgment.

It takes a merciful heart and a loving, compassionate person to allow another to be who they truly are without letting judgment or condemnation get in the way. You can't truly know or understand a person if they are defensive—protecting themselves from you, which is why there are so many lost souls in this world—marginalized by their histories and diminished in their self-esteem and clouded in

their own self-knowledge, because they begin to believe the worst about themselves. They are defensive about what others perceive as their reckless, unproductive lives because few have taken the opportunity to get past focusing on their “issues,” as if their whole existence as a human being can be reduced to a stereotype. To understand another you must help them open up, not close them down. You do that by offering them something better.

The spirit that Jesus represents here is a hope for lost souls. He represents in his accountable, but gracious, mercy what God seeks to do in redeeming a life and what humans can do for each other by empathizing enough to care for one who, like this Samaritan woman, thirsts for something better. In Jesus’ willingness to engage this forsaken woman and offer her a fresh start without letting her past be the starting point illustrates a way to deliverance—to salvage a life that has been afraid to be lived.

Granted, this story makes it appear so simple and easy, which it is not. People who are morally defeated by their repeated instability and failures need relationships they can trust before they can utter a word of truth about themselves. This is understandable; they have found their only freedom behind the protective wall of lies for so long and to lose that, literally, scares the hell out of them! Avoidance and self-deception are their protective friends. Yet, as Alice Walker observed, “No person is your friend who demands your silence, or denies your right to grow.” This woman at the well represents everyone who needs help toward their own redemption, not through scornful lectures for what they’ve done wrong, but by experiencing a

love that cultivates trust and offers them hope and won't let them go even while they face and struggle with their own demons.

It's fascinating to me that in this day and age when we have so much access to knowledge about people—when so much about our lives and reputations can be accessed and exploited by others—why so many fear intimacy and honesty, isolated as they are behind emotional walls of protection. It's also clear to me why there is still such a hunger for spiritual things. It's wired right into us. We hunger and thirst for a better state—a safer place to be psychologically, emotionally, spiritually—free from the stigma of shame. The universal quest is to know love and to be known by love, comfortably, intimately, unconditionally, and mercifully.

“Much of your pain is self-chosen,” so stated the Lebanese philosopher, Kahlil Gibran. Pain

...is the bitter potion by which the physician within you heals your sick self. Therefore, trust the physician, and drink his remedy in silence and tranquility. For his hand though heavy and hard, is guided by the tender hand of the Unseen [One]. And the cup he brings, though it burn your lips, has been fashioned of the clay which the Potter has moistened with His own sacred tears.

Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

And like the woman at the well, Jesus offers us another chance to engage life in order to live it not with shame, or avoidance, or resentment, but instead with startling relief and an open, hopeful heart. That is the blessing for those who long to drink deeply from the living water of life, those who have a deep thirst for a better place—those we know and those we need to love again. By so doing, we just might be able to welcome them home for good.

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