

March 19, 2017  
John 4:3-26  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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## ***Living Water***

### INTRO to SCRIPTURE

In last week's story from the gospel of John, Jesus has a "water and Spirit" conversation with Nicodemus- a leader from Jesus' own Jewish community. This week we will hear Jesus engaged in a similar "water and Spirit" conversation with a Samaritan women, someone from a tradition held in contempt by the Jewish leaders.

Throughout the gospel of John, we hear extended stories of encounters Jesus has with particular people. In each story, the person experiences something special about Jesus – some spark of Spirit, some holy presence right in that place. To help prepare us for the story we will first hear from the Adult Choir.

### SERMON

What a wonderful world! What good news that Jesus offers living water to all people!

There are a couple of things that typically would have prevented the conversation between Jesus and the person at the well. One is that she is a Samaritan and there was deep animosity between Jews and Samaritans. The other is that she is a woman.

If we had continued with the story as told by John, it says:

*Just then Jesus's disciples came. They were astonished that Jesus was speaking with a woman.*

Maybe that is why Jesus suggested she go and get her husband and come back. It would protect them both from the scandal of having a conversation alone together.

Yet, it is by these two characteristics – Samaritan woman - that we know the person at the well. We are never told her name.

Who would have thought that 2,000 years after this encounter at the well, we would still be struggling so much with gender discrimination and inequality. Gender categories can create such barriers against basic human interactions. In many parts of the world things are getting better for woman – more education, lessening of abject poverty, opportunities for employment. But there are still significant challenges.

Consider Afghanistan. Last week I received an email from Sue Chadima, who sings in the adult choir. She had just returned to Kabul, Afghanistan on the same day as the attack in the hospital in Kabul. However, she was able to travel through the city safely.

As those of you who have heard Sue talk about her time in Afghanistan know, Sue is a veterinarian who has been helping to develop veterinary practices there. As a westerner with these specific skills she is welcomed into the world of men. While there she has been welcomed into colleagues' homes. Yet, it is because she is a woman that she has had the opportunity to interact with women and children there, which would not typically have been possible if she were a man.

In a recent article written by Zahra Nader, a journalist from Kabul, she points out that Afghanistan is *one of the worst places in the world to be a woman. It has one of the world's highest maternal mortality rates, according to United Nations Women. And the United Nations Development Program gender equality index ranks Afghanistan at 152 out of 155 countries.* (New York Times, 3/16/17.)

This index measures reproductive health, education, leadership in government and engagement in employment. In 2014, the U.S. ranked #8. I am grateful for the improvements in women's lives that we experience in this country. Yet there remain many problems. The recent illicit distribution of videos of women Marines reminds us of the challenges.

Clearly there is considerable energy around women's rights concerns in this country, and around the world, by the turn out at rallies in January in Washington, D.C., Augusta, Portland, and right here in Brunswick. But the work to address these issues is before us each and every day.

By all standards of his day Jesus should have ignored the woman at the well. But Jesus'

standards were not the standards of his time. Jesus' standards were spirit standards. He knew the gift of the spirit was as essential to life as a drink of water. To him whether you were a religious leader – like Nicodemus – or a nobody – like a Samaritan woman – Jesus was ready to talk and listen. All seekers were welcome. What a wonderful community Jesus invites us into!

In our welcoming statement, at the front of the bulletin, we affirm Christ's love for each of us, no matter gender, or gender identity or expression. Gender identity is a new idea for some of us. Conversations with colleagues, friends, family members, and fellow parishioners are making clear to us in this time and this place that gender distinctions are not as binary as we have assumed as a culture. It's not as clear as checking male or female.

In recent conversations with a young adult friend whom I have known since birth, I have heard the struggle of someone trying to clarify gender identity/expression in a world that tends to see things as one or the other. I have been reminded of how important it is for others to listen carefully, openly, and lovingly to what is happening in a person's spirit as they seek to know and express their own person. As they seek "living water."

A range of gender identity and expression is not new to human experience but we are having more open discussions about it. This is challenging for those of us who never really thought about it and suddenly find ourselves with a child or grandchild who is transgender or gender fluid. I've had several people say to me (with puzzlement and concern), "I've finally gotten my head

around someone being gay. Couldn't they just be gay. This is so new to me."

It's even hard to be clear about the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity, which are not the same. If you grew up in a time when no one even talked about the "birds and the bees", it truly is a whole new world.

Yet, in the Way of Jesus, it continues to be a world calling for grace of spirit, openness to the other, and trusting in the presence of God.