

Exodus 17:1-7

¹From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ²The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" ⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

John 4:5-42

⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. ⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." ¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." ²⁶Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

²⁷Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” ²⁸Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him. ³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” ³²But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” ³³So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” ³⁴Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ ³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.” ³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

GRACE TO GROW

In working out this week’s sermon, I began thinking about what my wife and Holy Bible have in common, and I came up with five points:

1. **Sometimes they’re both incomprehensible.**
2. **Sometimes I think I understand them and end up being wrong.**
3. **When I do comprehend them, I often wish I hadn’t.**

Now let me stop for a moment and explore these three similarities more deeply. I suppose you could say that, just as some folks choose never to get married because the single life *can* be less stressful, some people avoid studying the Bible or committing to faith for the very same reason. As long as one is not committed to either, one can live the carefree “Hakuna Matata” life. And just as some folks who *do* get married maintain a shallow relationship with their spouses, some folks who express faith have a rather shallow relationship with God and a superficial understanding of scripture. And just as these folks avoid conflict with their spouses whenever controversy raises its ugly head, many a Christian stays safe by not treading the deep waters of faith, not even opening the Bible to see what lies therein. Some couples can live their entire lives without really knowing one another in a state of comfortable ignorance just as some Christians can live comfortably with a very shallow faith by avoiding difficult questions. This is not a very stable condition; just as I have spoken to men and women who thought everything was just hunky dory in their marriage and were completely surprised when their dissatisfied spouses left them. Of course God never leaves us, even when our relationship with him is as shallow as a kiddie pool, but we hardly have a relationship with a true God when we’re afraid to address the tough questions or when we avoid reading scripture. Usually a crisis occurs, in our

faith and in our marriages, when we learn that things are not what we thought they were, what we *wanted* them to be.

Reading the Bible, like being married, can be challenging and painful at times, particularly when we find out something about ourselves that displeases our spouses or displeases God, and Bibles and spouses both tend to expose us to our faults and sins. When our pride takes the front seat, we may reject either our faith or our spouses, leading to a divorce. We can keep our eyes shut to the truth that is being presented and run away from it, or we can face the music, which is the fourth similarity between my wife and the Bible.

4. They open my eyes.

Opening our eyes is the positive response to the challenges we face as a husband or wife, or as a Christian. It's painful to open our eyes sometimes. The Bible often describes God as a bright light; I just had my eyes examined and the doctor put those drops into my eyes to dilate my pupils then shined his little flashlight into my eyes. It hurt! Facing certain truths about ourselves can be very painful. But if we face that light and open our eyes, good things happen in our relationships.

Now I'm probably going to disappoint you when I tell you that I don't have any story of marital crisis to share with you this morning. But the Bible did teach me something about myself, something that I'm not very proud of, yet something that is leading to a change in me. It all started with today's gospel lesson – I have preached on this passage before, and I *thought* I had a pretty good grasp of it, but this week I learned that I had misunderstood a portion of it. That doesn't seem so horrific in and of itself – a misunderstanding can be a minor thing. But that misunderstanding forced me to look a bit deeper into my thought processes, and there, deep within me, I found prejudice. Let me explain.

Up until this week I had always made certain assumptions about "the woman at the well." As the story goes, Jesus sits alone near a well in Samaria, and a Samaritan woman comes to get water. Jesus asks for some water and a conversation ensues. First the woman wonders why a male Jew would be so bold as to speak to a female Samaritan – public conversation between males and females was discouraged, Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies. As happens so often in the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks in mystical terms (I call it "Spirit-ese") about "living" water which will cure all thirst for all time. The woman says, "Sure, I'd like some of that water."

And here's where things begin to get a little foggy. Jesus tells the woman to go get her husband, to which the woman responds, "I aint got one." Then Jesus says, "I know you don't; you've had five husbands, and the man you're living with now is not your husband." Two things seem odd about this part of the story: First, *why does Jesus tell the woman to get her husband when he knows that she aint got one?* Second, *why does Jesus bring up the fact that she's had five husbands and the man she's now living with is not her husband?*

And so what I did was made this story comprehensible in my own mind. I figured that Jesus asking this woman to get husband was a set-up for her to come clean about her sordid past. Jesus is setting her up to make a confession that she has had five marriages and the man she is living with is not her husband. The woman, being embarrassed, gives Jesus an incomplete answer: "I have no husband," which is true but isn't the entire, nasty truth. Jesus, therefore, embellishes her brief statement: "*Yeah, I know all about you lady; you can't hide anything from me, I know you've had five husbands and the guy you're with now is not your husband.*" And Jesus, being the epitome of grace and forgiveness, does not flinch but remains there with this sinful woman giving her ample opportunity to confess her sin. The woman, however, being uncomfortable with Jesus' clairvoyance, quickly changes the subject by bringing up religious doctrine regarding worship, which led to questions about Jesus' own identity, which led to the woman bringing the village to Jesus. This is how I chose to comprehend the story.

It's rather scary how our minds so often assume the worst about others. I'm ashamed to say that if someone is late for a meeting with me I assume that they are just inconsiderate. My first thought is not that they are stuck in traffic or handling a family emergency or in a hospital bed. What scares me even worse is the assumption that I, and others, have made about the woman at the well. Thinking this woman was involved in five rather short relationships with different men, I assumed that she was young, although the passage doesn't say anything about her age. I assumed her to be promiscuous, though the passage doesn't offer any explanation about why she'd been married five times or for how long she was married to each husband. The passage says nothing about the quality of the relationships that this woman had with each husband. She could have been a very loving and faithful wife. I assumed that the man who the woman lived with now was a lover, someone cheating on his real wife, though the passage does not give any explanation. What caused me, and others like me, to reach the conclusion that this woman is guilty of some sin? I have two aunts who have each been married three times. *Their husbands died! Did my aunts do anything wrong?* Even if the woman in today's story was divorced, should we blame her, particularly when she lived in a culture where a man could divorce a wife for burning the toast or *not producing an heir!* And if her last husband had died before she produced an heir, there was a little thing called a Levirate marriage where the brother of the deceased husband marries his brother's wife – though it is not "technically" a marriage, hence the man she is living with may not "technically" be the woman's husband.

So I said to myself, "Self, let's look at this passage in a new way. Let's look at the woman at the well in a new light." She is, first of all, a woman, who is treated as a man's property in those days. She is a Samaritan, thus despised by the Jews in general, and Jesus happens to be a Jew. And let's suppose she's infertile – a plausible reason for a man to divorce her in a day and age where a woman's only real status comes from her ability to bear children. For whatever reason, and not necessarily because of any fault of this woman, she's lost five husbands, and now she is under the care of a man who may feel obligated to care for her and sees her more as a burden than a blessing. And now ask yourself why Jesus asks her to go get her husband, and then share with her his knowledge of her tragic history. **Jesus is not asking for her confession; he is telling her that he is aware of her situation, her suffering.**

And how would this poor, disenfranchised, barren woman respond to this Jewish man who not only knows her suffering but knows the reasons as only the one true God could know? I think her heart would be racing, not out of fear or shame or guilt but out of hope! *“There is something of the divine in this man, yet he is a Jew and I am a Samaritan, someone who the Jews reject for adhering to a false religion. Yet there is compassion in this man’s voice, in his eyes, in his words. Am I really an outcast in his eyes because I am a Samaritan?”*

And so she pays Jesus some respect and poses a question: *“Sir, I see you’re a prophet. Now tell me, are we Samaritans wrong for worshiping God on this mountain and not in Jerusalem?”* To which Jesus answers her, *“The day is coming when it won’t matter, because God cares more about how you worship than where you worship.”*

And now this woman goes out on a limb: *“I’ve heard about this Messiah dude, who will explain all things to us, kinda like you’re doing right now...”* and Jesus says, *“That would be me.”*

Now things start to fit together a lot better. My eyes have been opened, and not simply to a new way of understanding this story; I’ve seen something in me that needs to change, because the assumptions I made were based on false conceptions of women, or, to be more precise, they were chauvinistic! And because my eyes are a bit more open now, I will not only read scripture in a new light; I will live my life in a new light. Of course the awareness of my chauvinism does not mean that it is eradicated, but the awareness will allow me to be on guard in case it should raise its ugly head at some other place or some other time. And I can pray for a change of attitude.

There is one more thing that my wife and the Bible have in common:

5. They remind me of God’s grace.

I don’t beat myself up for my sins, past or present. As I said, being aware of a prejudice does not make it go away; that takes time and prayer. But in the meantime, I can live with my sin because God, like my wife, accepts me for who I am, sin and all. In today’s story, it is not the woman at the well who is the one with the greatest need for God’s grace; it is the men who treated women like chattel. It is the Jews who despised the Samaritans. And it’s the reader who makes faulty assumptions about a woman who we really don’t know much about. Thank God for the grace that exposes us to our sin while still embracing us in divine love.