



## The Mirror-Man

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field  
The Third Sunday in Lent, February 24, 2008*

*John 4:5-42:*

Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The 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.) Jesus 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but 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." The 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." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But 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. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." Just 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?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him. Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do 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. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They 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."

Mirrors are a funny thing. They can be your best friend or your worst enemy. Some mornings I look in the mirror and say something to the effect of, "I think I'm going to frighten children and small animals today." Some days I'm pretty satisfied with the image reflected back. Since I have had teenage daughters, my need for a mirror has decreased. They are always eager and willing to point out any flaws in my appearance, making a mirror largely unnecessary. The problem with mirrors (and teenagers) is that they are just so darn honest. It's pretty hard to hide from reality when you're literally staring it in the face. We can try and pretend we don't look the way we actually do, but when faced with a mirror, that pretense quickly disappears. I've met a few people who are like mirrors; they seem to be able to see who I really am deep inside, as if they know me through and through. A feeling that can be quite disturbing—the feeling there is nowhere to hide.

I think the Samaritan woman at the well probably felt the same way. She was simply going about her daily routine when she had this life-changing encounter with a mirror-man, a man who could see her clearly and reflected who she was back at her. An encounter that led to healing she wasn't looking for and probably didn't expect.

The story of this encounter between Jesus and the woman is remarkable in many ways. This conversation is the longest Jesus has with anyone in John's Gospel, and this woman is the first person to figure out who Jesus is, and the first person to whom he acknowledges that he is the Messiah. She is the first evangelist in John—as the story tells us, many Samaritans believed in Jesus due, at first, to her testimony.

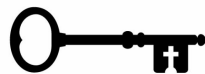
And the details of this story are unusual—details that may have lost their impact in the huge cultural divide that separates us from first-century Palestine. This encounter is with one who is an ultimate outsider. First, she is a woman. Jewish men were not supposed to talk to women other than their wives in public, and women were not allowed to worship with men. One of the morning prayers that men regularly used began with the phrase, “Thank you that I am not a woman.” One particularly extreme group of Pharisees, known as the “bruised and bleeding Pharisees” would even keep their eyes closed when outside their homes in case they accidentally looked at a woman, thus rendering them unclean. Consequently they would walk into walls and other objects and become bruised and bleeding.

And of course this woman was a Samaritan, one of those hated for worshiping God at the wrong temple and in the wrong way. For Jesus, a Jewish man, to talk to this Samaritan woman, was an absolute scandal. Clearly she was as surprised as anyone at this conversation. She certainly knew that Jewish men could not drink from a bucket of water drawn by a Samaritan woman—that contact with an outsider would make Jesus ritually unclean and in need of purification. Further, the fact that she was at the well alone, at noon, rather than in the cool of the early morning, which was probably when the other village women went to the well, signaled that she was an outsider even to her own people. She lived a life on the fringes, a life excluded from the community. She likely lived a life of shame and expected this Jewish man, meeting her at the well in the middle of the day, to ignore her or berate her—a triple outsider.

What Jesus does, however, as so often happens, is the unexpected—he speaks with her. And this conversation held in the searing noonday light quickly takes a religious turn—although it seems that at times, neither Jesus nor the woman is really sure what they are talking about—actual well water or the living water that Jesus offers. To her credit, she hangs in there with him in this strange conversation, which suddenly and jarringly gets very personal—moves from the water of life to her life. Jesus asks her to go and get her husband. She, truthfully, answers that she has no husband, and Jesus replies with the clear knowledge of the reality of her life, the truth of who she is—that she has had five husbands, and the one she has now is not her husband. Now, we are not sure from the text why she has had so many husbands. It could be that each of her husbands had died and, in accordance with Levirate Law, she kept marrying one of the surviving brothers. It could be that she had been divorced five times—although as women could never initiate a divorce in ancient Israelite Law, that really should not have been held against her, but all that notwithstanding, divorced women were shamed women—outsiders. And her current housemate was evidently not her husband, which was clearly outside acceptable behavior. Whatever the facts, it *is* clear that she was regarded as having strayed from expected behavior in her society—she had crossed a boundary. Once again, however, Jesus' response to her is remarkable. Jesus never reprimands her; he simply points out the truth of her situation, simply reflects back the truth of her life and her being. And, instead of moving away from her at this point, he moves closer. He doesn't allow her past to dictate his response to her, to dictate her future. He comes in closer to her, despite her questionable marital status, her femaleness and her religion. And it is in recognizing who she is that he reveals who he is. He refuses to label her as “other,” as an unclean woman, as a wrong-worshiping Samaritan, as a “less than” human being. And in this refusal, this recognition of her humanity, he heals her of her shame and “otherness”—the last line of the story indicates that she was in contact, in conversation with the people of her village again—she had been made whole—by Jesus' acceptance of who she was and who she could be.

And this is where the contrast between us and Jesus becomes pretty clear—where the honesty of the mirror becomes uncomfortable. We find it all too easy to label and define others—to make them “other,” which is actually code for “less than.” We live in a society and a world with what seem to be clearly defined groups of who is OK and who is not. We label people according to race, religion, ethnicity, income level, sexual orientation and gender. It is frighteningly easy for the other, the “not OK,” to be seen as less than human. Our fear and our need to have proof that we are in, meaning there are out, can lead to tragedy and worse, to outright evil. Think of the Holocaust, Matthew Shepperd, Abu Ghraib. Whenever we engage in the calculus of “acceptable” and “unacceptable” people, we are treading on very dangerous and un-sacred ground. Whenever we insist that certain beliefs, usually ours, are the only acceptable beliefs, and that others must join us or be wrong, we are treading on dangerous ground. If we are to follow Jesus, we must meet people where they are, just as he met the woman at the well where she was and, like Jesus, we are not to label, condemn or make them into “other.” Jesus' declaration to the woman at the well that she was worthy to drink of the life-giving water essentially declares to all who are outside, who are other, that they are worthy of drinking from that limitless well.

And, of course we don't have to engage in all these calculations—calculations based on the thinking that salvation for one means damnation for another, love for one means shunning or worse for another. For now we do indeed see through a mirror darkly; we have trouble looking at the truth of our own reflection and prefer to spend our time critiquing that of others. But in God's eyes, in God's kingdom we are thoroughly known and thoroughly loved. We don't have to run around proving ourselves to God, showing ourselves to be better or more worthy than others. What we do have to do is to feel deeply in our being this love, to let it pervade us, to *know* that God is and that God loves us. Then we have to respond in love—leave behind our calculators and our measuring sticks. See the dignity of every human being, every unique child of God, not just those we have decided are OK. Go out of our comfort zone and serve others. The church, in particular, is called to cross those human made boundaries just as Jesus did, rather than build new ones. We are to live into God's dream of wholeness and community for us and for all whom God created in and out of love—recognizing that wholeness, salvation, is offered freely on God's terms, not ours, that there are no privileged positions or people. Then we can look in the mirror, even in the extreme glare of noontime, unafraid of our own reflection. We can look knowing that our reflection isn't perfect, that it is a work in progress, and there will be days we still scare children and small animals, but knowing that the truth reflected in that mirror is acceptable to God, is known by God and is beloved of God. Knowing that the mirror-man would look at even us and draw closer.



Open hearts. Open minds.