

Great Women of the Bible – The Woman at the Well
John 4: 1-26, 28-29, 39-42
July 8, 2007

By any measure of material wealth, talent or affluence Staci's young life was on the way to success. Her mother was a successful Real Estate executive and her dad was the CEO of a large savings bank. Staci was beautiful, attended the best private schools and showed talents in many areas. But she felt emptiness inside surrounded by success. She craved her parents and others' attention and by the age of fifteen she got the attention she craved by having sex. Her promiscuity opened the door to drugs and alcohol as she lost her dignity and sense of self-worth. Staci found she could make a lot of money as a topless dancer. She could make even more if she did what the men asked her to do. She said she had no more boundaries as she became a prostitute. She always felt in control of what she chose to do, so she rationalized that she had a certain kind of power. It was this false sense of power that now filled the void that she felt inside. One evening she was called out to a bachelor party to perform. Right after the party began the doors were broken down and chaos ensued. It turned out to be a police "sting" operation and she was arrested, taken to jail, and charged with prostitution. "As I was sitting in that jail cell, I cried out to God," Staci remembers. "I said, 'Lord, save me. God, if You're real, would You show me who You are? I want to know who You are because there's nobody else to help, and if You're real, just let me see who You are.'" Amazingly the charge of prostitution was reduced to trespassing. Staci felt strongly that God had intervened in her situation. She decided to try something she hadn't tried in years. She visited church. It was as if the Holy Spirit was saying to her, "Come. Don't be afraid." She remembers the minister saying that God had come in Christ for the outsider, the unholy, the liars, the

prostitutes, and the broken ones. She wondered, “Does this minister know who I am? It is as if he is speaking directly to me.” He gave a powerful invitation and her heart was changed. She said that she felt chains drop off her body: “I felt much like the woman at the well, where the woman at the well goes to tell her friends, 'Hey, there's this man, and he just exposed me. He knows everything that I've done. Can you believe this? I'm not ashamed.' That was me. God knows everything I've done and He loves me. And so at that moment, I was filled with freedom and joy and life and love. It was as if love came and just touched my heart, and I knew that was what I was looking for all my life.”

I wonder what was going through the mind of the woman at the well that day in our text. Boundaries, walls really, were crashing down all around her. Joshua, the one we know as Jesus, whose name means “wall breaker” was entering into her life. Down crashed the wall between a woman and a Jewish rabbi – a class of person who would never speak with a woman like her. Down crashed the wall between Samaritans and Jews. Most Jews would have gone completely around Samaria in making such a trip from Jerusalem to Galilee. There was much in common between these two cultures but there were differences. They all came from the same ancestral tree – Jacob. Two half-ancestors, Mannaseh and Ephraim, were the forefathers of the Samaritans. They both worshipped the one true God of Israel. The Samaritans, however, only read the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. And they believed God lived on the mountain nearby, Mount Gerizim in the north, just forty miles north of Jerusalem. It was on this mountain that Adam arose from the dust. It was here that Noah's Ark came to rest. It was here that Abraham went to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. It was the only place to worship the true God. Jews from Jerusalem would say, “No, only in Jerusalem can God be worshiped.”

For seven hundred years, since the conquest of the Assyrians, Samaritans had begun to intermarry with the conquering civilizations that occupied their country. They had not kept their people pure but had become half-breeds in the eyes of the Jews. Thus began a feud between Jews and Samaritans that lasted for hundreds of years. It was a feud that fueled the attack on the Samaritan temple just 125 years before. It would be a little like the war between the Yankees and the Confederacy in our country. So on this hot day, as Jesus rested on his long journey, he broke down walls between this woman and them that had existed for centuries.

What begins is one of the longest dialogs with Jesus in all of the Gospels. It is a conversation where Jesus speaks at a spiritual and metaphorical level while the woman speaks at a much more literal level. Jesus breaks the ice by asking for water. The woman is in shock. He then says that she should ask him for water since he could provide “living water.” Now living water can be interpreted several ways. Living water literally meant the kind of water that comes from a spring. Jacob’s Well is a deep, 100-foot cistern, not the source for living water. The Samaritan woman responds with national pride over Jacob, challenging Jesus as a greater power than her ancestors. Jesus responds that this magical water will quench her thirst forever and will be a source for eternal life. The woman responds sarcastically, saying, “give me this water so I won’t have to haul all the way back here again.” Then Jesus does the thing that gets her attention. He knocks down the wall to her own self. Asking her to fetch her husband he reports the fact that she has five ex-husbands. Now divorce was a practice reserved only for men. If a woman in the husband’s eyes was a bit defective (couldn’t have children, was adulterous, or whatever the man did not like) he could simply send her away without any consent by the wife. So

she is a five-time rejected woman. Somehow Jesus knows this, accepts it, and still reaches out to her in a way that no one has ever reached out to her before. The hero of the Torah, the book worshiped by Samaritans, was Moses. The signal moment in all of that text was when Moses first encounters God in the burning bush in Exodus 3:14. Moses asks God who he is and God responds (in the Greek), “Ego eimi.” I AM. So when this Samaritan woman confesses her faith in the anointed One who is to come, Jesus echoes God in Exodus, saying, “the One who you are speaking with, *Ego eimi!*” Thunderbolt. This woman who is surrounded by thick walls not of her own making sees them all come crashing down, with a God who comes after her, exposes her in this intimate moment and loves her anyway. This woman on this day gulps down living water that quenches her deepest thirst.

Many of you know that for many years my “living water” was 12-year-old Scotch and California Chardonnay. As the old saying goes, “one was too many and seven or eight were never enough.” I am a grateful, recovering alcoholic. Alcohol for many years kept propped up many walls around me. Alcohol kept up the walls that prevented me from having to feel anything. Alcohol made me lucid, funny and sociable. Alcohol constructed a wall between my pious, public life and a secret one that I thought only I could control. In truth it was all a lie for I found that there was absolutely nothing I could control when it came to alcohol. I was powerless, my life had become insane, and it was only God who could restore me to sanity. Only God could knock down the walls of my own little world, but I had to become ruthlessly honest. I had to give myself over to God without abandon. There were promises of freedom that I read about in recovery, but it was only possible if I allowed God to knock down the walls to my secret life. I had to

write down a searching, fearless moral inventory. Then I had to do something utterly unimaginable. I had to tell another human being the exact nature of my wrongs. All of those skeletons (that God had already named before me) I had to pull out of the closet and admit them to another person. Impossible! But I knew I had to do it to survive. What I didn't know is how liberating it would be. And I didn't know that through this whole process God would deliver on the promises of serenity and that the compulsion to drink would leave me. I had experienced living waters now replacing the watery grave of my past.

Like the woman at the well and like Staci experienced, Joshua, this Jesus, had to be a wall-breaker in my life. By telling me everything I did, no holds barred, and still loving me, I experienced the flood of living waters washing over me. Now it is my task, to continue to experience this grace, to take this good news to every Samaritan that I meet.

You know "coming out" is not just for alcoholics like me. Every person has to experience coming out in her or his life. GLBT people experience that in a profound and risky way. Breaking down the barriers to who you really are and how your Creator has made you is a scary endeavor. But it is one that every one of us needs to encounter. It requires us to realize that we are absolutely dependent on God. It requires brutal honesty. So how is it with you today? Is there something that you think or pray neither God nor anyone else should know about you? What might that be? For if you're like me, that is not a healthy place to be for very long. Living waters are those waters that expose and then cleanse us to our deepest being. God is not a remote being that we have to scale a mountain to meet. God is not a being that lives behind a veil in a temple that only the

right people can visit. Jesus says that the day is now here when everyone will have access to the true God who we worship in Spirit and truth. Not a God of head games or right beliefs. This is a God whose Spirit is intimately connected to our deepest places, our beauty and our dark places, and loves us anyway. What good news is that! Our task, like that of the woman at the well, is to be absolutely honest about who we are. We are to drink deeply of the living waters that God raises up in each of us. We are to experience God that wells up in each of us.