

March 12, 2023 – Romans 5:1-8 & John 4:5-26

“One of these things is not like the other. One of these things just doesn't belong.” Do you remember that old Sesame Street song? They'd divide the screen into four sections. Three things would have things in common, but one thing would stand out as different from the others.

Being able to compare and contrast different things is an important skill. Something we teach children from an early age. And as we grow up, that skill of comparing and contrasting gets used in many ways. Much of our decision making is based on comparing and contrasting.

For example, I use it all the time when I'm shopping. I hate shopping. But despite that, it takes me forever to go shopping because I'm constantly comparing everything I see. Looking for the best product and the best deal.

Another time we use it is when we are comparing ourselves to others. Our skills, our strengths and weaknesses, our moral triumphs and our moral failures. Which can be a good thing and a bad thing, depending on who we're comparing ourselves to and how honest we're being with ourselves.

Our Gospel lesson invites us to make this same comparison and contrast between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Because one of these things is definitely not like the other. First, we have Jesus. A man. A Jewish man. A Jewish rabbi. A Galilean, yes, but one who hails from the royal lineage of King David. And a man who is perfect in every aspect of the Law. He may not be rich or politically powerful or good-looking, but he is the cultural pinnacle of respectability for his day.

And at this well he meets a woman. Which, I'm sorry, but that's already a knock on her. Should it be? No. But in that era, women were simply not as respected as men. Just after this passage, we read about the disciples coming back to Jesus and the text says, “*They marveled that he was talking with a woman.*” Not just this particular woman, but any woman at all. This was not something that a respectable Jewish rabbi does.

But, of course, she's not just a woman. She's a Samaritan woman. I think we all know by now how Jews felt about Samaritans. The woman is shocked that Jesus would say one word to her. John himself says, “*For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.*” Even in Samaria itself, as Jesus was, it was still expected that a Jew would look down on a Samaritan.

And then, finally, we have this exchange about her background. She has five husbands. Now, we don't know how all those marriages ended. Did they divorce her? Did they die? Is she a terrible wife? Is she a gold digger marrying elderly men for their money? Is she now regarded as being cursed because all her husbands die? We just don't know.

But I can guarantee you one thing: there is no situation in ancient Palestine where being married five times raises the social status of a woman. Whether she is a divorcee or a widow or some combination of the two, this woman has no respectability in her community. So it's kinda no wonder she gives up on marriage altogether and just shacks up with a man. She's got nothing to lose. There's very little chance a man will ever marry her again. Not after five previous marriages.

So here we have them. Jesus and the Samaritan woman. A portrait in contrasts. At a glance, they have nothing in common. Nothing.

And yet, Jesus finds something that they have in common. They're both thirsty. And I mean that literally. It is high noon. It is hot. They are both at this well to draw water. They are both very thirsty. It's not much, but it's something. And Jesus uses it to start a conversation.

Because he wants them to have something else in common. He wants her to have the living water that only he can provide. You see Jesus is only physically thirsty. But the woman is spiritually thirsty as well.

She's thirsty because she is an outcast, not just from her own community, but from the kingdom of God. And for all the same reasons. She's a woman, so she can't enter the inner courts of the Samaritan temple with the men. She's a Samaritan, so she can't enter the real temple in Jerusalem at all. Most of all, she is a sinner, with five husbands and an adulterous relationship, so – in her mind – she can't possibly enter kingdom of God.

She is thirsty. And it has left her in a place completely different than Jesus. It has left in a wilderness – a wilderness of sin – that is hot and dry and thirsty for water. And so Jesus offers her a drink.

He offers her something that he has. Something that only he has. Living water. Water that once you drink of it, you will never be thirsty again. Water that wells up inside you to eternal life, so that you have water to share with the whole world.

He gives her of himself. He gives her something divine. Something of His own Truth and His own Spirit. Something that isn't found in temples or on mountains. Something she can't get from her gender or her marital status. Something that can't be taken away even by the sins of her past.

She and Jesus are nothing alike. And yet, by telling her that he is the Messiah, the Christ, and calling her to find refreshment in his Word, he is making her like him. He is giving them a point of comparison. They are not only contrasts. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And she now knows the Way, has the Truth, and Lives again through Him.

It's something that St Paul reiterates in our Epistle lesson. He tells us: *“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

We are weak. We are ungodly. We are sinners. He is strong. He is godly. He is righteous in every way. We have nothing in common with Christ.

And, frankly, there's no reason why he would want to have anything in common with us. Because like that Samaritan woman at the well, we are outcasts without any respectability or status in God's eyes. We are the lowest of the low. And there's simply no reason why the Son of God should even wish to talk to us. Even ask us for a drink of water from our bucket.

Yet, he did far more than that. While we were still sinners, Christ Jesus died for us. And he gives us of himself. He gives us living water, that quenches our thirsty soul. He gives us bread from heaven, that feeds our hungry heart. He gives life and life abundantly to someone who has nothing in common with him.

And, in the process, he gives us something in common with him. Paul writes in our lesson, *“God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”* We had nothing in common with Christ before he came to us. But after he comes to us, after he gives us his living water, we have something in common: love.

With that living water, we have the love of God poured into us. We have the Holy Spirit anointing us, like it did at Jesus' baptism. And now, when God the Father looks at us, he doesn't say, “One of these things is not like the other, one of these things just doesn't belong.”

No, he says, “Oh, I recognize you. You have my Spirit upon you. You have the love of my Son poured into your heart. You look just like Jesus. You are my child.”

And, in that, *“we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* That Samaritan woman's life wasn't just one of spiritual thirst. It was a life in which she was God's enemy. She was in conflict with her Lord. Her sinful heart wanted nothing to do with God's Law and so she was stranger to him.

In Christ, in the living water he gave to her, she found peace with God, for the first time. She found a God who loved her and poured his love into her heart. So that she couldn't help but run to her neighbors and tell them of this man who told her everything she ever did. Every sin she ever committed. And yet still loved her.

We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We were God's enemies, in conflict with his Law. But the love of Christ has been poured into our hearts as living water, welling up to eternal life. And now it overflows in our lives, in word and deed.

“One of these things is not like the other. One of these things just doesn't belong.” Looking at Christ, we may feel like we don't belong in His kingdom. We look nothing like him, after all. But we have the one thing that matters. We have his love in our hearts by the work of the Holy Spirit. And that means we belong to him. Amen.