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Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

We All Have More to Our Stories

John 4:5-42

So 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 man of Judea, 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 God 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

someone who told me everything I have ever done! Can this be the Messiah?" 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 the one who sent me and accommodate the work of that one. 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 Jesus 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 Jesus 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."

What are the stories you tell about yourself?

As a middle-aged woman and a good midwesterner, I am not equipped to brag about myself. I'm well-versed in the tools of self-deprecating humor and deflecting compliments. Even when people ask me directly about the good things I have done, I hem and haw, downplaying my role. I'm not good at telling the good stories about myself.

But the stories I tell myself are even worse when they are rooted in shame. One thing goes wrong - I hurt someone or miss a deadline - and it can trigger a deep spiral where I am stuck in my head, rehearsing every time I have ever hurt someone or said the wrong thing.

When I am in this place, the stories I tell myself about who I am can be the most brutal—I always have been and always will be someone who lets others down, dodges the difficult thing, and hurts other people. There is no hope for someone like me and no one will ever love me. Your shame spirals may sound different, but most of us have been there before.

I remember being stuck in a place like this when a mentor said to me, "Would you ever say something like this to a person you cared about?" Whew. Stories have power—the stories we tell about ourselves and the stories we tell about others.

I think about this woman at the well and the stories I have told about her. I mean, who does she think she is, a Samaritan *woman* speaking to a Jewish *man*? Surely she knew better, since Samaritans were looked down on by Jews. And Jesus calls out this brazen woman for her loose morals and shameless behavior in the five husbands she has had and the current man she is not married to. And the fact that she went to the well to draw water at noon—not the time to go when you live in an arid land—meant that she was an outcast and trying to avoid the other more respectable people.

Whew. What a story! I wonder if this was the story the people around her told about her. Historical interpreters have been harsh, but I can just imagine how the village gossips or the elders may have talked about her.

But once we look closely at this story, it doesn't hold up. It's a story that has been perpetuated by those in power who sought to keep their power by discrediting the value of this woman and distracting from the real purpose of the story - to bring the outsiders in, to say that even those who might worship in the wrong place or don't have the right pedigree, they too belong to the kingdom of God.

When Jesus came to the well, he saw *the woman*, not the stories others told about her or the stories she told about herself. As Jesus gave her the living water, he gave her a new story, or perhaps it was an old story about who she had always been before life took over. He gave her back the story of who she was—someone who cared for the people entrusted to her, a little girl who was cherished and loved, a young woman with dreams, an adult who faced the world in front of her with grace and courage even when it seemed stacked against her. Jesus saw the true story of who she was, and it was a long drink of cool water on a hot day.

While the Samaritans did not share things in common with the Jews, they were close cousins. They were the descendants of the people left behind in the exile and the people who occupied the land, but they worshiped the one true God, though their customs had changed over the years. And—did you notice?—this story took place in Samaria. It might have been more surprising if she had not been a Samaritan.

And who knows why she was at the well at noon? Maybe that's when she needed water. Maybe she had some other task that was more pressing in the morning hours. Maybe her not-actually-husband wouldn't let her socialize with the other woman. There's many stories we could tell, but whatever the reason might be, this was when Jesus was also at the well, tired and looking for a drink of water.

And then, once Jesus started to talk to her about water, he asked her to go get her husband, to bring propriety to their conversation, revealing that she had had five husbands and was not married to the man she was currently with.

In all of the judgment and the shame that history has heaped on this woman, we forget the role of women in this world. If a woman had five husbands, it was not her fault. Because a woman was no one without a husband, because a woman was unsafe without a husband, because a woman could not own property and had no security, having a string of husbands was not her choice. This was the work of society and the men in her life. And this last man who was not her husband—this says more about him than the woman at the well. Whether or not they would marry was not in her power to decide.

With the way I was told this woman's story, I always wondered why her testimony about Jesus was, "He told me everything I had ever done." That never seemed like good news to me. Years of patriarchy told me that when Jesus told her everything she had ever done, it was a list of sins, a list of ways she had fallen short and how she was to blame. Why would *that* be something to share?

But in their conversation, Jesus brings living water. Just last week, we heard Jesus tell Nicodemus that "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (See *Note 1*) Living water is meant for all people, drawing them to the source.

But what about the stories we tell about other people? About the people we dislike and disagree with? I struggle to love those who I don't think love other people well. When I hear someone advocate violence or demonize immigrants or malign trans people, when I hear someone speak in ways that are racist or sexist or classist, that becomes the only story I tell about them. That becomes all that they are, the sum total of their being.

Yet these people too have more to their story. We are all more than the best thing we have done or the worst thing we have done. We are both sinner and saint—and sinners drawn to the living water to be washed clean and made whole.

In his prayer for peace, St Francis prayed, "Where there is darkness, let me bring your light. Where there is sadness, let me bring joy." Telling the true, living water stories of people brings light and joy. But we cannot do it on our own.

We cannot share Jesus' living water until we have drunk deeply of it. When we have received the living water, it becomes a "spring of water gushing up to eternal life" and *gushing* is not easily contained. When we have experienced freedom in hearing our stories through God's eyes, we cannot help but testify, "God showed me everything I have ever done."

Still, sometimes it's easier to change the stories we tell about other people than the stories we tell about ourselves.

Siblings, I know the stories Jesus tells about you - he calls you Beloved. He says, remember that you are made in God's image - you are a magnificent creation.

So come, sit at the well. Be refreshed by the one who Created you, the one who Redeemed you, the one who Sustained you. Hear from the one who delights in you so your testimony may be about the one who has told you everything you have ever done—and that may be good news to share with others. Let us join Jesus' work of sharing living water with the world. Amen.

Note 1: John 3:17