

“A bucket, a mountain, a table, and ... the savior of the world”

St. Mary's Seminary & University  
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She is alone. So is he, alone, and tired, and thirsty. She has a bucket, and the cistern is deep, and the noon sun high and hot. So he asks her, tells her really, “give me a drink.”

And so it begins, this complex negotiation of identity and boundary, of tradition and transgression, of past and future, of question and answer, of giving and receiving, of veiling and revealing, of alienation and embrace. There's a lot going on in this complex story, so full of detail, delicious irony, and delightful depth. There's a lot going on, but in this week of prayer for Christian unity, let's focus on a bucket, a mountain, and a table.

First, the bucket. She has one, he doesn't. You can see why Jesus is the one who asks for a drink. If she shares, there will be sufficiency—just enough to slake the thirst of a weary traveler. If she doesn't, if she observes the proprieties that divide Jew from Samaritan, not to mention lone woman from strange man, then he'll remain parched and she'll maintain purity.

Yet beneath this surface, like the rumblings of a geyser about to spout, there is a different economy at play. Not scarcity and sufficiency, but invitation and abundance. If you knew the gift of God, if you could see the abundance that is available through me, a spring of water welling up to eternal life, if ...

If there's a lesson for divided churches praying together, perhaps it's just this: we too easily dwell in imaginations of scarcity—shrinking congregations, diminishing finances, dwindling vocations, a thirst for glory days past. I could go on recounting a litany of loss, but you get the picture of thirsting churches in a parched and threatening desert. If we live in scarcity, then every ecumenical encounter begins by sizing up who owns the bucket and who is likely to drink the well dry.

But if we know this gift of God that is Jesus, then we'll recognize that our true situation is not scarcity, but “too much water” (to use Sam Wells' apt phrase), an abundance so overwhelming that everything is

changed. By verse 28, which we didn't read, this Samaritan woman gets it, sees it, recognizes the abundance of living water being offered. How do we know? Because when she went back to town she left her bucket behind. Who knew that an empty, abandoned bucket could be a sign of the abundance of God's kingdom?

Second, the mountain. Before she sees Jesus for who he is, and thereby recognizes the abundance he is offering to give, the woman makes a move we are all tempted to make in ecumenical encounters: let's squabble about our differences over worship. She says "our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you worship in Jerusalem." That's about par for the course of Christian division: we accuse one another of false worship or idolatry or inadequacy or ignorance. So she braces him for liturgical conflict: here or there, Mt. Gerezim or Jerusalem, high or low, vestments or business casual?

Jesus refuses to take sides. Instead of an answer to her question he gives her a gospel word. Now the obvious gospel word is this: the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth"; that's who the

Father is seeking, Jesus says, to be true worshipers—a nameless Samaritan woman . . . and you and me. That's already good news, gospel. But there's more.

Just before Jesus says "neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem," he says to her "you will worship the Father." The 'you' is plural; she's the only one there. Jesus is speaking to just this lone, lonely woman, but nonetheless he says "ya'll will worship the Father." It's not a grammatical mistake, it's a theological correction.

Implicit in that plural is a promise: you all will worship. Jesus is looking forward to the power of his word refracted through her witness, to the bucket of living water she'll carry back to Sychar to pour all over her neighbors. So we could squabble over which mountain, but our shouting would drown out Jesus' gospel promise: you all will worship the Father, my Father!

Finally, the table. Augustine said this story is "pregnant in symbols" (quoted in Christiania Peppard, *Just Water*). That's true but ironic, as some contemporary scholars speculate that the reason this nameless woman has had 5 husbands, and now

lives with a man not her husband, is that she was infertile.

Well, if barrenness was her biological condition, the story makes clear that having drunk living water, her theological condition is an exceeding fertility. Remember that Jesus' disciples went into town, got lunch, and brought him back nothing but a Big Mac and fries. They didn't bring any converts.

But she did! This barren, fruitful Samaritan, she also brought forth faith, not just her own, but the many Samaritans who began to believe in Jesus, who asked him to stay with them. No wonder the Orthodox celebrate her not as the nameless woman at the well, but as Saint Photini the Evangelist.

And there the story ends, the dividing wall of hostility broken down by a flood of living water, Jew and Samaritan sharing one and the same spring of living water, sharing in one and the same true worship of the Father, sharing hospitality under one roof. Remember that throw away line early on—Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans? Well as those who use nothing in common now sit at one table and share one bread, it just becomes obvious that

“this [Jesus] is truly the savior of the world.”

And if that picture is not a prayer for Christian unity, I don't know what is.

