

“Conversations at the well”

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The theme for this year’s Lenten Midweek Prayer, “Holy Conversations with Jesus,” gives us an opportunity to dive more deeply into Sunday’s gospel text from just a few days ago, reminding us of our own conversations with Jesus.

Tonight’s reading centers on the conversation of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. Tired out by his journey into Samaria, Jesus sat down by the well in the midday heat, watching people gather to draw water. The words, “*tired out by his journey*” show Jesus in our humanity as “*the Word made flesh*.” Jesus sat down at a community well where people came for water because all people need water to live.

Early in my missionary career, I lived in Tokyo in the Hongo neighborhood, across the street from the “Red Gate” entrance to the University of Tokyo. Located on the other side of the university campus, there is a small historic well named “*Benkei no kagami ido*” (Benkei’s mirror well), named after a Buddhist priest named Benkei. I passed by this well frequently because it was a shortcut on the way between my apartment, Ueno Park, and the train station. There is commemorative sign next to the well, telling its history and relation to Benkei going back to the 12th century. This sign, erected by the Taito Ward of the City of Tokyo, also mentions how this well saved many lives during the fire-bombing of Tokyo in 1945.

When I lived in that neighborhood, women continued to draw water from this well, and on one occasion, one woman told me, “This water is delicious.” Today, however, though the old hand-driven pump is still works, it now carries a sign saying the water from this well is no longer fit for drinking – a reminder that keeping underground springs pure is difficult in large urban areas with constant construction. Perhaps you also have a memory of drawing from a well or have lived in a house with well-water. We all need water to live. The phrase “living water” in tonight’s reading literally means “running water” – water that is not stagnant, but alive, pure, and life-giving.

Though Japan and America became fast friends in the postwar era, that small well in my old Tokyo neighborhood reminds me that all people, both friends and enemies, need running-living water to live. Just as I learned to appreciate the history of how that small well in Tokyo saved the lives of many during a time of war, the Samaritan also gave Jesus a brief history lesson about Jacob’s Well.

And so, we arrive at tonight’s text as Jesus sits down at the well, a place of history, a place

where Samaritans and foreigners, friends and even enemies, gather because we all need water to live. Jesus spoke to a Samaritan woman, a woman of a different nation and religion. He initiated the conversation with her, saying, “*Give me a drink,*” and in doing so, Jesus instantly crossed the boundaries of gender, ethnicity, nation, and religion.

The Samaritan woman immediately sensed this boundary crossing, replying, “*How is it that you a Jew ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?*” She was recognizing Jesus as a Jew, as a man of religious difference and a foreigner in her land. Jesus offered her “living water,” saying, “*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.*” Her reply, “*Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water,*” shows her misunderstanding between “running water” and the spiritual meaning of Jesus’ words, “*living water.*”

It’s here that Jesus suddenly shifts the conversation, saying, “*Go, and call your husband, and come back.*” Jesus has sussed her out. He knows who she is, and she knows it. Like looking in a mirror, she replied, “*I have no husband.*” Jesus commended her reply and candidly spoke of her history of successive marriages, yet notice, Jesus never condemned her about her life story, her gender, nationality, or religion. Jesus accepted her as she is.

Her reply – not without a bit of dry humor – “*Sir, I see that you are a prophet,*” leads to her own confession of faith, and the geographical differences in worship between Mt. Gerizim and Jerusalem. They are now in genuine conversation. In acknowledging and accepting their difference they have moved closer to one another. Here, Jesus opens a completely new and revolutionary spiritual vista – namely, that the hour is now here “*when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.*” In one explosive sentence Jesus shatters the idea that true worship is bound by geographic and ethnic difference. True worship is a matter of God’s Spirit and truth within oneself.

Her reply, “*I know the Messiah is coming,*” attempts to bridge the difference between them. Her reply is a profound step toward religious dialogue with Jesus because she intentionally uses the Hebrew word “Messiah,” instead of using the Samaritan word for the expected one who would restore true religion and justice, the one called “the *Taheb.*” Hearing this, Jesus said, “*I am he, the one who is speaking to you.*” It is a profound moment in which two people with different histories, backgrounds, and religions recognize not only their shared humanity, but a shared future. Saying, “*I am he,*” Jesus has given her “living water.” She left her water jar behind and became a messenger of good news about Jesus to her community. Leaving her water jar is highly symbolic, because she now possessed “*living water.*”

The challenging message of John's gospel is that Jesus is proclaimed as the Savior by the people of another nation and religion. The final words of tonight's gospel reveal that others in her community had also received living water from Jesus. They say, "*We know that this is truly the Savior of the world.*"

We continue to have trouble grasping the scope of this message. In the heat of the day, in heated discussions, and amid hot international differences dividing humanity, Jesus offers living water. He crosses boundaries, sits among people, not to condemn, but to offer life.

Christians need to struggle with the Jesus who goes where we are often afraid to go – to all people in their difference. Jesus helps us overcome the differences that divide human beings. He is the source of genuine community and genuine conversation. Jesus meets us not with condemnation, but with life. He is with you in all your conversations with those who are different from you.

What is the well you draw from each day? What is the well that overcomes your thirst for forgiveness and acceptance? What is the well that offers you water to share with others who are different from you?

Tonight's gospel is a story about reconciliation – reconciliation between genders, ethnicities, nations, and religions. It is a story about the missionary nature of God who goes to all people in Spirit and truth – no longer bound to a single nation's mountain or temple.

Something to think about on a quiet Wednesday night in a world where we still struggle to have genuine conversation with those who are different from us – a world where we are at war with difference.

During Lent, meet Jesus again at the well. He will tell you everything about yourself, allowing you to see your own thirst and need – allowing you to see the thirst and need of your neighbor.

Like the Samaritan woman, may you also go and tell your story to others, and trust that Jesus is with you, offering living water to all whom you meet. Amen.