

“Freed to Love”
March 8, 2026
Scripture: John 4:5-42

This is one of the longer stories we ever read in worship. It’s touching and engaging, and it reads like an authentic encounter. But as we learn so often when it comes to stories in the Bible, there’s a lot more going on here than meets the eye.

We’re told Jesus is in Samaria, a region of Israel that lay north of Jerusalem, which is in the region of Judea, and south of Galilee, where Capernaum and Nazareth are. It’s not exactly hostile territory, but it isn’t real friendly. Jews and Samaritans have a complicated relationship. They share the same ethnic heritage. The people in Samaria are the descendants of the original inhabitants of the northern kingdom from the Old Testament. If you’ve ever heard of the so-called “10 lost tribes of Israel,” that’s the Samaritans. Their population was integrated into the Assyrian population when Assyria invaded some 800 years before Jesus’ was born.

The remaining Israelites from that invasion, and they’re called Samaritans because the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel was the city of Samaria, the remaining population continued to follow Torah, so held Torah as sacred text, but rejected the prophetic books in the Jewish canon. So, their way of worshiping was different from their kinsfolk in the south, and they built a temple on Mt. Gerazim for that worship. I don’t know how long that temple existed, but about 200 years before Jesus was born, the Jewish population rebelled against the Greeks who occupied the region at that time, drove them out, and rededicated the temple in Jerusalem. They also demolished the temple on Mt. Gerazim.

There’s at least a couple hundred years of resentment and hostility under the surface of this conversation. I think it helps to know that because it shapes how we understand the dynamics at work between Jesus and this woman. This is not just some casual encounter. Both these people carry with them the weight of their history, so when Jesus speaks to this woman he steps across a boundary neither of them has been prepared to cross. He’s taking a huge risk.

That’s why we can hear the suspicion in her response. “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” She is on her guard. She’s a woman alone in a remote spot being confronted by a strange man who’s part of a hostile group. And as we learn a little later, she is not a naïve person. She knows how the world works.

There are so many levels of conflict in this story. We have the ethnic/cultural conflict I just described rooted in a history of violence. We have the common patriarchal conflict that exists between men and women in a world where all the power goes one way. We have a religious conflict over what’s the right place for worship. And we have a moral conflict that gets exposed as they talk and her marital circumstances are revealed. All of that is in this crucible and threatening to explode. Something really terrible could happen here.

We don’t know anything specifically about this woman, but the story does give us a few clues. We’re told it’s the middle of the day and Jesus stops at a well outside a town to rest. The

woman comes alone to get her water. Some commentators have observed that it seems odd that she would come alone, that time of day to fetch water. Ordinarily that seems like a morning chore, and one that women would do together. Why has this woman waited until the middle of the day and come alone to the well? It's purely speculation, but I wonder if she's alone and in the hotter part of the day because she isn't welcome among respectable company. This could be a person who is alienated from her community because of her lifestyle.

Think of it: she comes in the middle of the day because most folks are resting that time of day and the well is free of gossipy neighbors. She just wants to be left alone. Instead she finds a strange man sitting there, a Jewish man who probably hates Samaritans, who won't mind his own business. She came alone that time of day because she was already in a bad place, and things just get worse. She came to get some water, but her own well, her inner well is running dry. She's trapped in a life she never anticipated and now she's in a circumstance she can't really control. Have you ever been in that place? Have you ever found yourself cut off from community, feeling defensive and afraid?

We all carry with us the weight of our histories. We carry generational guilt and regret; we carry personal feelings of loss and disappointment, missed opportunities at work, miscommunications at home, arguments with friends or family. We carry a lot of stuff with us and sometimes it feels like our well has run dry. It feels like we are trapped. And when someone asks us for something, we can be wound so tight, that we just snap. Who do you think you are, talking to me, asking me for something I don't have the strength to give?

“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.” Those words from Jesus are spoken, I believe, with compassion and not to tease. He's not making fun of her. Maybe he sees the exhaustion on her face, the sadness and loneliness in her eyes. She's been trapped so long that her immediate response to anyone reaching out to her is to shut them off. But Jesus won't do it. He won't play that game. Instead he takes her by the hand and helps her dive deep within herself where she can find what she really needs. “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

He offers to set her free. The relief, the longing in her voice when she says, “Sir, give me this water!” is palpable. And it's interesting how even her most embarrassing condition, the thing about herself she most wants to hide, is revealed and makes no difference at all. Some interpreters want to hear in Jesus' words some kind of rebuke when he points out she's had five husbands and the man she's with now isn't her husband, but I don't hear that. He commends her for being truthful, even though she didn't mean to be. I'm sorry, but Jesus is not judging this woman. He sees her. And he likes who he sees.

Why isn't it that easy for us? Why can't we just accept each other and enjoy one another's company? Jesus looks deeper than we do. We just see the surface of things. We allow ourselves to be convinced of others' unworthiness based on nothing but appearances. But if we drink from the living water Jesus offers and yield ourselves to the spring gushing up in us, we can be freed to love like he loves. We can be freed the way he frees that woman who came

carrying the weight of the world on her back and leaves behind her burden so she can run and tell all her neighbors what's waiting for them at the well.

What an amazing gift he gives her. Freed to love. And once she's freed he can tell her anything at all about himself and she knows it's true. All the boundaries that had kept her boxed in and trapped by her heritage and her history, they all fall away. It doesn't matter who worships where. It doesn't matter who's a Samaritan and who's a Jew. It doesn't matter who you love. It doesn't matter what your condition in life might be. You are freed to love. The spring of love is gushing up in her, in us, in anyone open to put their trust in Christ who loves us fully, no exceptions, no conditions, just loves us as we are for who we are.

His disciples don't get it. Not yet. But she absolutely does. In time they'll understand. In time they'll see they, too, are freed to love. But, folks, it doesn't happen on its own. Jesus' offer is there, always, but we have to take it. We have to choose to let go of a past that holds us back, that keeps us trapped. That means all the old resentments, all the old hatreds, all the old regrets have to be let go. It means we have to look deep in the wells of our own souls and accept the truth of who we are and the love that's ours in spite of it. That's how we are freed to love one another. No more hiding, no more isolation and alienation. That's the gospel. You are freed to love yourself and everyone else you meet. The living water is in you, gushing up to eternal life. Drink. And be free.

Amen