

The Third Sunday in Lent  
Year A  
March 15, 2020  
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*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 Jew, 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 him 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 a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" 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 him who sent me and to complete his work. 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 him 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 he 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."*

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Earlier this week, I received an email from one of our parishioners, with a little note to lift my spirits: "I thought you might need a joke," it said. Attached to the email was a cartoon from a Franciscan oblate who is an artist, prefaced by this message: "The Gospel reading for Sunday is one of my favorites, which I have given a little twist here. I hope it lightens your stress and anxiety"

And right below was a drawing of Jesus and a woman, standing alongside one another behind a stone well, each pumping from a large bottle....and the caption read, "Jesus and the woman at the Purell Well."

One of the reasons this made me laugh out loud is that, earlier in the week, when our Parish Administrator, Patty Duffy, had gone online to order Purell for the church, it was all sold out. So Patty looked up a recipe for homemade hand sanitizer, went to the store and bought a bunch of aloe vera gel and alcohol and mixed up a bucket of our own....which has now been dispensed in flowery plastic bottles all over the church grounds.

So, I've been thinking a lot this week about buckets and essential things (like hand sanitizer and water) and the deep wells where you find them...and the places you go and people you might meet when you do.

At home, I have this trusty plastic bucket I fill with water and vinegar to mop my hardwood floors. I picked it up the other day and thought about the different places and houses in which I've used it and the many uses I've given it as I've moved through various stages of life. [It sure came in handy when I had to gather my son's Legos from the playroom floor!]

Most of you, I imagine, have a bucket in your house somewhere, and it probably also has a number of uses. Buckets hold things. They help you clean, garden, and water. If you were thirsty and standing by a well, you would need a bucket if you hoped to get a drink of water out of the well.

The woman at the well in today's gospel knows the value of a bucket. When she says to Jesus, "You have no bucket and the well is deep," she is making an accurate assessment of the situation on the basis of appearances. She is saying, in effect, "The task is monumental and you do not have the means to accomplish it."

These are words I find myself saying when I stand at my own deep well with no bucket, when I am facing a situation that exceeds my abilities alone to address. Maybe you do this, too. Perhaps you've just been given more responsibility at work and wonder how you are possibly going to be able to fulfill these obligations. The well is deep and you have no bucket. Maybe a loved one is struggling with an addiction or an unhealthy relationship and you feel helpless in the face of its power over them. The well is deep and you have no bucket.

We may all be feeling this way in the face of the Coronavirus outbreak and the suffering it is going to cause to people all over the place: not only to the people who can't afford health care, the ones who usually get hit the hardest, but everyone...tests are scarce, hospital capacity limited, childcare unavailable, businesses will be laying people off, families will have no income. Add to this the suffering that already exist...children subject to abuse, the homeless who live a hidden existence, immigrants fearing deportation. The well is deep and we have no bucket.

When the Samaritan Woman says to Jesus, "You have no bucket and the well is deep, where do you get that living water?" it doesn't occur to her that he's the one to quench the thirst within *her*, as he sits next to the well.

You see, in the gospel of John, Jesus' identity is revealed through a series of episodes like this one that scholars call "recognition scenes." These are encounters that Jesus has with others who are given opportunities to really see him, recognize him for who he is. Like in his first interchanges with the disciples, or with the crowds, or his friends Mary and Martha. Some recognize Jesus for who is, the very face of God...the love of God made flesh, and some do not. Some, like the woman in today's story, go and tell their neighbors about Jesus. Some do not. Some recognize him but can't muster the courage to make a public witness, like Nicodemus, who we heard about last week, or, in my opinion, Pontius Pilate.

The thing that stands in the way of people recognizing Jesus is their tendency to look only as deep as appearances, to stay at the literal level rather than go deeper with Jesus to the spiritual level. Think about our story of Nicodemus, last week, who struggles to get what Jesus means by being "born from above" or "born again." *How can I go through my mother's womb, twice?*

At first, that is what happens with the Samaritan woman at the well, when Jesus starts talking about the living water he can give. She replies, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep." At this juncture, she is thinking literally, but Jesus is talking about deeper, spiritual substance, the living water that you don't need a bucket to receive.

And the point he seems to be making is that this spiritual sustenance is available to anyone who stands next to a deep well – without a bucket in sight.

Perhaps this is something Jesus knows this woman from Samaria needs to hear and recognize. Because it's clear that she is entangled in some kind of situation, personally and in relation to her community, that she can't solve or harmonize. As a woman without a legal husband, she has no means in her culture to gain dignity or community. She is reduced to seeking her sustenance, drawing water, at the hottest time of day to avoid people, and the derision of others.

So from the outset, this woman has three strikes against her when it comes to being spoken to, much less respected, by a Jewish male. 1) She is female; 2) she has a complicated marital history; and lastly, she is a Samaritan, a people whose enmity with the Jewish people was ancient, entrenched and bitter. Even so, Jesus speaks to her, engages her in conversation that honors her personhood and her intelligence, and offers her living water—a relationship with him and with God that restores her to dignity and community. He recognizes her limitations and vulnerability, and even so, or perhaps because of this, he gives her the water that heals.

For me, this story is an invitation to consider our own deep wells, the places you and I stand with no bucket. Can we picture the thought of Jesus standing by our side at the most monumental tasks and the most hopeless situations? In the heat of the day and at the height of our fatigue? As we stand beside a deep well with no bucket, can we accept that our truest, spiritual sustenance is not a far-off prize to be earned, or a scarcity to be hunted down or bargained for, but a close resource, around us and within us and available in each passing moment?

The African-American educator Booker T. Washington was fond of telling a story about how a sea-going vessel in the South Atlantic Ocean signaled for help from another vessel not far off: "Help! Save us, or we perish for lack of water!" The captain of the other vessel's reply was "Cast down your buckets where you are." Supposing that the second captain had not gotten the message accurately, the troubled ship signaled yet again. "Help! Save us, or we perish for lack of water!" Again the nearby ship signaled back, "Cast down your buckets where you are!"

This exchange went on until the first ship, in desperation, decided it had nothing to lose by following this outlandish advice. When crew members cast down their buckets, they drew them up filled with clear, sparkling water - from the mouth of the Amazon River. They had not realized that the powerful current of the Amazon carried fresh water from the South American rain forests many miles out in to the South Atlantic.

As you stand at your deep well with no bucket, remember where to find living water. "Still yourself," says poet Jan Richardson, "and you will feel it rising up within you, filling every emptiness, springing forth anew."<sup>1</sup>

The only bucket you will need is your heart.

Amen

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Richardson, "Blessing of the Well" in *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons* (Orlando: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015), 109.

## Blessing of the Well

If you stand at the edge  
of this blessing  
and call down into it,  
you will hear your words  
return to you.

If you lean in and listen close,  
you will hear this blessing  
give the story of your life  
back to you.

Quiet your voice.  
Quiet your judgment.  
Quiet the way you always tell  
your story to yourself.

Quiet all these and you will hear  
the whole of it and the hollows of it:  
the spaces in the telling,  
the gaps where you hesitate to go.

Sit at the rim of this blessing.  
Press your ear to its lip,  
its sides,  
its curves that were carved out  
long ago by those whose thirst  
drove them deep,  
those who dug into the layers  
with only their hands and hope.

Rest yourself beside this blessing  
and you will begin to hear  
the sound of water  
entering the gaps.

Still yourself  
and you will feel it  
rising up within you,  
filling every emptiness,  
springing forth anew.

—Jan Richardson  
from *Circle of Grace*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid