

In our current climate of “social distancing,” “self-quarantine” or mandatory quarantine, the woman at the well experienced all of them. The coronavirus was not the culprit, but a long list of potential barriers kept her distanced and ostracized from her community. We don’t know if she came to the well alone by choice or by regulation, but she was practicing social distancing. She was seen as an outsider.

The well was a social gathering place and usually a communal activity in which they all shared together. Women would come to chat as they gathered the day’s water. Men would also use it as an opportunity to select a potential wife since there was a large gathering of women to choose from. But this woman was not part of that community.

Last week, we talked about Nicodemus, a named prominent and influential leader of the Sanhedrin. Today, we meet an unnamed woman with no prominence or influence. Part of this is the cultural lens; women were considered outsiders by gender alone. There are some women named in the Bible, but not this one. That’s part of her story.

Her story doesn’t end with the portion of scripture that was read today. You have probably heard the rest of her story before, about how Jesus knew her marital situation. Everyone in her community knew her marital situation, how she has had five husbands and the one she currently lives with doesn’t claim her. Perhaps that was why she went to the well at noon, the hottest part of the day. They usually gathered water in the evening when it was cooler. Perhaps she wanted to avoid the judgmental glances and the gossipy

whispers, so she went when no one would be there.

Perhaps she wanted to avoid being hassled by the men who would continue to treat her like merchandise. Her reputation was not a product of her wrong choices. She didn’t get to choose whom to marry in this culture. She was used as a piece of property, and then tossed aside when the men were done with her. The community – men and women – treated her the same way. Perhaps they even told her not to come around when they were going to be at the well. She was in quarantine.

That could explain her surprise that Jesus was at the well when she was, and that he actually spoke to her. Her response reveals another barrier. She questions him: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (v.9). John gives us an important detail that Jews and Samaritans don’t share things. Similar to when whites and blacks could not share drinking fountains and restrooms.

Jews and Samaritans have a long history of hate. The Samaritans claim to have Jewish ancestry from the Northern Kingdom, yet they intermarried with the Assyrians after Israel was conquered. The Jews from the Southern Kingdom didn’t consider them to be “pure” and called them “half breeds”. The Samaritans accused the Jews of allowing their religious rituals to evolve beyond the original Torah in which they followed. After their division, they never wanted to associate with the other.

Most Jews would even travel around Samaria to avoid it at all costs, yet Jesus doesn’t. As a Jew, he goes to minister to all the outcasts, not just the one woman at the well. But he begins with her. The nameless woman is an outsider because of her gender,

her race and ethnicity, her religious beliefs, and even her reputation. She's an outsider to the Jews and even within her own Samaritan community.

Yet Jesus goes to her and asks her for a drink of water. Jesus shows that she is worthy, that she has value, that she matters. Many people – even her own people --turn away from her and push her out of their community, but Jesus doesn't. He seeks her out and engages in conversation with her, takes her seriously, and spends several days in her village. He doesn't just spend a few moments with her, but a few days.

Jesus doesn't let the barriers, that have caused her to be an outsider, to remain barriers. Jesus breaks through the barriers to get to her, to offer her something no one else has or can -- living water. Water that will heal her wounds, so she can become a part of a community. She begins an outsider, but Jesus makes her an insider who becomes the first person in her village to experience this living water. She is so excited about this transformation that she can't keep it to herself.

She goes to tell the others about Jesus, the very people who treated her like damaged goods. And, they listened to her. The people who dismissed her now listen to her and believe her. This is no small miracle. This is God's love at work.

Because of Jesus, the woman goes from outsider to insider. She not only becomes a part of the community, but she is a prominent member who brings hope and healing. John 4:42 says, "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.'" They are speaking to her, not just listening. They are engaging with her now, and they acknowledge her value of being a conduit of God's love. They have experienced this living water through her sharing it.

Jesus takes a situation in which people don't share common things into sharing the good news of Christ. The woman at the well becomes well. We talk today of the necessity of social distancing and self-quarantine during these trying times, and those things actually come naturally to us. We have all been the woman at the well, when someone or a group has distanced us. Or maybe we have distanced ourselves out of shame or guilt or self-preservation. But Jesus can make us well. By his wounds, we are healed.

Let us remember that "In this time of increased isolation and social distancing, Spirit draws us together. It is the ligament that connects us over all boundaries, the gravity that pulls us together, the Unity that prevails despite the world's divisions. Maybe now more than ever Love helps us care for our neighbor, even as we keep our distance. And gives us the wisdom, courage and humility to know when to get close anyway."<sup>1</sup>  
Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Garnass-Holmes, *The Woman at the Well*, [www.unfoldinglight.net](http://www.unfoldinglight.net).