

An Unexpected Blessing

John 4:5-42

Tappahannock Presbyterian Church

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You ever have something really good happen to you that you didn't see coming? We all have. But have you ever had blessings happen to you, and you didn't catch on until later? Sadly, we've all been there, too.

This story is about a woman who received blessings, but didn't see the blessings until after she put it all together. She received FOUR blessings; she recognized at the end, along with others, that they were all part of one GIANT blessing. You'll see that it's our blessing, as well.

The text tells us that Jesus was on one of his healing-and-teaching journeys, and his path took him through Samaria. It was hot; he was tired; he was thirsty. So he did what was natural. He came upon a well in a small town, and there was a Samaritan woman at the well. So he asked her for a drink.

He did what? Not to a Samaritan!? And not to a WOMAN!? Samaritans and Jews hated each other. Their hatred went back quite a ways, back to right after the Exile. Each thought the other was wrong about how to worship and serve God. Jews thought Samaritans were unclean in every way, so they avoided Samaritans at all costs. And women! Women were supposed to know their place. Women weren't supposed to speak to males outside of their own family, let alone engage them in conversations or debates. Jesus knew that! So what's going on here? What's going on is Blessing # 1. Jesus is doing a TRIPLE violation here. Besides being around a Samaritan woman and showing favor to her – which you'll see in a minute – and *talking* to her as an equal, receiving water from her will involve contact, and now he really will be unclean. Why is

he doing it? *Jesus is reaching across the divide that human beings have put up. He is elevating this woman, whether she knows it or not. The blessing is that Jesus is reaching out – to HER.*

She must have been amazed; her next words sound like she can't believe it. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan?" She doesn't receive and accept the blessing. She questions it! Maybe she doesn't recognize it! She'd fit into our world, where we're all cynics, and we all think that there must be a catch; there's always a catch. There's something fishy going on here, the woman thinks. How hard it is to just relax and let Jesus give to us! But Jesus is ready. Her doubt leads him right to where he wants to go. "If you knew the gift of God," he says, and – Wow! A gift of God? But wait, there's more: "...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." Well, that's just – what? What do you mean? The woman was bound to be puzzled now, and maybe a little startled. She must have thought, "Who is this guy? Only God can give a gift from God, so – who is he saying he is?" Then there's the bit about "living water," which a lot of folks have taken to be some sort of reference to baptism. It isn't – it's deeper than that. Jesus does a play on words: "living" water in the original can also mean "flowing water," not stagnant – in other words, drinkable, since water from moving streams is more pure, and therefore life-giving. And if it's life-giving, it is *living* water. You have to have water to have life, so someone who's giving you good water is giving you life. But only God can do that! This woman doesn't come close to recognizing this second blessing until later. Jesus is revealing himself to her, so that she can have life. THAT is the "gift of God."

But the woman doesn't yet grasp how huge this gift is. That's because she's still thinking in terms of *earthly* water. That's like us, isn't it? We think of blessings purely in terms of this earthly life. We look at the little stuff, and miss God's bigger picture. The woman would have been satisfied with finding a source of good water to make her [earthly] life better. She would have regarded that as a true blessing. I'm afraid that's ingrained in the human spirit. We think about what we need RIGHT NOW! We tend to celebrate and praise God for the good things that happen in this life. And that's not bad or wrong! I'm just saying that it takes our eye off of the bigger things God is doing. Even preachers get fooled into doing that; one of the most popular of the TV preachers now is a guy who preaches what I call a "prosperity gospel." He's all the time mentioning how God blesses us with *things*, how we should be thankful for our good fortune, and we should pray for it! This woman is already thinking about how much of a *drag* it is to have to haul this big bucket into town every day, and drop it down into the well and haul it back up, and then carry that heavy thing back home. Now, if this Jewish guy talking to her can point her to living water, to a nice stream somewhere nearby, her life is going to be much better. She won't have to do all that dropping, and hauling up and toting back to the house.

Notice, we haven't gotten to the 3rd blessing yet. Be patient! – just as Jesus was. He was bound to know what she was thinking. You couldn't blame him if he was getting a little frustrated about now. It's all according to plan. Jesus stops this talk about water. He's ready to reveal himself for who he is. He does it by cutting through to the weakest, darkest part of this woman's soul. Instead of answering her request to give her the living

water, Jesus says, "Go, call your husband, and come back." It must have been a startling thing for the woman to hear. Instead of saying "I'm not married," John records her as saying, "I have no husband." Maybe she won't get the living water, after all. Then Jesus raises the blinds, so she can see who he is. "You have no husband," says Jesus, because you've had FIVE husbands, and your current partner isn't your husband at all! This was a moment of condemnation – or was it?

You sense that the woman's eyes are beginning to open, she's beginning to see. Her words, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet" tell us so. But then, like any of us would do when faced with a life-changing commitment, she starts to weasel, she starts to waffle, she starts to looking for ways to *get out of this!* So she goes to the hardest thing she can think of: the differences between Jews and Samaritans. A hidden thing here is that the "you" she says is in the plural. It means something like "you people," or maybe you could even translate it "you Jews." So she's saying, "Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain; but *you Jews* say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." I got a problem, prophet! This is where we see Jesus' third blessing to her. Jesus has been VERY PATIENT with this woman. He's been patient with her because there's a BIGGER blessing about to come. And now, he tells her something we all ought to hear. God is to be worshipped in *spirit* and in *truth*. You can also translate this to say God is truly worshipped only in *spirit*. And you don't need a Temple or a special place for that. "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth."

What!? No Temple or special mountain needed? You could almost say here's another blessing, but it leads to the fourth blessing for this woman. As I read this, I

almost think she's trying to weasel out once again. "When the Messiah comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Hey, man, this all sounds great, but maybe I'll wait for the Messiah? Jesus reveals himself to her right then: "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." It seems clear to this preacher that it had the immediate impact Jesus wanted. This woman left her precious water bucket right there at the well, and ran back to her own people. I think we have to say, in this moment, the Samaritan woman at the well had come to believe. Oh, I know she sounds a little doubtful. The way it's put together in the original language, her rhetorical question expects a "no" answer: "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" She is still that astonished. But her actions speak loudest. She begins telling them to come with her and see this Jesus, "a man who told me everything I have ever done!" The fourth blessing is that Jesus has revealed himself, gone out of his way to reveal himself, so that this woman can come to faith. But why? It's all at the end of the story. The woman does bring some of her Samaritan neighbors to Jesus. After hearing him, they go and tell MORE Samaritans. And so "many" were brought to belief in Jesus.

Now as you can see, this has all built up to saying that we should all tell others about this amazing guy Jesus, and inspire them to bring others to hear about him. Our gospel writer did a better job of it than I can do. Before we get to the end of the story, though, John has Jesus interpret what it all means, *before* those Samaritans actually come back to him. He interprets it to the disciples, but to us as well. Jesus speaks of "reaping what another has sowed," meaning, in all likelihood, that the disciples will bring people to belief because of the seed he and the Holy Spirit have sown in them. It's an

interpretation of what's happened with this woman. What's happened to her you might call the FIFTH blessing. Or, as I think, it's the one blessing preparing the way for all the others. This woman, in response to Jesus, has begun the mission of telling others about "God's Great gift," the Good News of salvation. Think about how it all went. Jesus elevated this woman by considering her worthy, to speak to and receive water from. He offered her a gift, God's gift; when she balked at receiving it, he was patient with her, because he didn't want to give up on her. To convince her, he revealed who he really was to her. And that brought on her faith.

This all sounds a lot like people in our world, in lots of ways, and maybe that's why this story has so much power. People get ground down by life in this world, made into hopeless cynics, rendered unable to receive anything without questioning it. Life pushes people around so much, they think they're not worth much. I'm convinced that's true! The incredible pace of 21st century life makes everybody impatient; and so many people feel like there's nothing meaningful, no one who cares. But when they have the truth revealed to them, that there's a God who loves them very much, that there's a God who came and suffered for them, that there's a God who wants to give them an impossibly good gift – so many people are ready to hear this, that we have a field, ripe for harvest, whose seed has already been sown and watered by the Holy Spirit. We'll do it in a way similar to what Jesus did with this woman: we'll harvest people by building them up, in every way we can. We'll harvest by being patient with them, by telling them over and over again what they need to hear until they really hear it. And we'll reveal God to them, firmly and finally, by everything we do.

That's a lot to think about! But just think about it this way: every smaller "blessing" you receive is pointing you to the biggest one, the Gift of God we call salvation. Count your blessings, people, and then tell the world. If you do that, you'll be giving *God* a blessing. And there's nothing cynical about that.