

OK, my nod to St. Patrick's Day. An Irish priest was transferred to Texas. Father O'Malley rose from his bed one morning. It was a fine spring day. He walked to the window of his bedroom to get a deep breath of the beautiful day outside. He then noticed there was a jackass lying dead in the middle of his front lawn. He promptly called the local police station:

"Good morning. This is Sergeant Jones. How may I help you?"

"And the best of the day te yerself....This is Father O'Malley at St. Ann's Catholic Church. There's a jackass lying dead on me front lawn."

Now Sergeant Jones considered himself to be something of a wit, replied with a smirk, "Well now Father, it was always my impression that you people took care of the last rites."

"Aye, 'tis certainly true," O' Malley replied. "But we are also obliged to notify his next of kin."

First, some background on this incredible gospel. The well itself is special. The author of John alludes to the well at Sychar***, in Samaria, as 'Jacob's Well.'" In the Book of Genesis, this is the place where Jacob first laid eyes on his beloved Rachel, who becomes his wife. So this is a well where lovers meet. Remember that – a well where lovers meet. We'll circle back to that. Wells also are important centers of community and information in desert lands – like the water-cooler or coffee station in our culture. But this well is special because of its history.

Second, it's strange that John has Jesus travelling with the disciples in Samaria, because this is expressly forbidden to them in Matthew, where Jesus alleges that His mission is to the tribes of Israel, and bars the apostles from going to Samaria or the pagan lands. There is no mention of a mission to Samaria in any of the synoptics. Yet, in the Acts of the Apostles, Samaria is the first mission undertaken by the Jerusalem church after Pentecost. This is another indication that something unusual is happening in this story, something unexpected.

Third, there's John's summary of the state of affairs between Jews and Samaritans, for any who might not know: "Jews have nothing to do with Samaritans." The hatred between these 2 Semitic groups was already ancient in the first century, and stories of bloody feuding and the hurling of filth and insults between Jews and Samaritans are found in non-scriptural accounts. John seems to be saying that there is no human explanation for what is about to happen. Jesus is a man of honor and a Jew, she is a dishonorable woman and a Samaritan, and ne-er the twain shall meet.

Enter their mutual thirst, and Jacob's well, the place where lovers meet.

What is truly amazing in the story is that Jesus begins asking for a drink. He risks all the taboos, and opens up the possibility of a new future with a word of vulnerability. "Give me something to drink." In typical fashion, John has the woman miss the point, play the foil, and we get a chance to see that she's not going to be an easy mark. She knows the score: "Hey, Jew-boy, how can you ask me, a Samaritan and a woman, for a drink?" (That's not exactly how it is translated, but it conveys the contempt at which the dialogue begins.) But as their conversation ensues, she is drawn more deeply into the heart of the thirsty man. We can imagine that He did, finally, get His drink of water. And He is finally able to reveal her own thirst to Him. "Give me this

living water, sir, so that I don't have to keep coming here to draw water." Then Jesus tells her to go call her husband.

Now often this leads to making this a story about a fallen woman, and the whole problem of salvation is a mess of human sexuality, specifically female sexuality, and how Jesus will fix it all if we just listen to Him. We often end up reducing this very complex story to something about sex so that we can think of it as about somebody else.

Second main point. This background indicates that this story isn't just about a woman and Jesus, but is about the new Christian church and the people of Samaria. The Church was born from Judaism -- and ultimately excommunicated from Judaism, and the people of Samaria were seen as Jewish renegades. They are also the subject of the first mission of the early church. The 'five husbands' could represent the five gods that the Samaritans worshiped, along with Yahweh. It's there in the dialogue that takes place. Jesus says: "the one you are living with now," the worship of God in their own temple, is also not her husband. The literal number of gods (or husbands) does not matter. But the Hebrew word *baal* points us in this numbering direction. And I'm sorry to inform the ladies -- but Baal means both 'god' and 'husband.' What matters is that John adds them up (5 + 1) to SIX. SIX is the symbol, in Jewish numerology, of complete imperfection. (Think of the 'number of the Beast' in Revelation, '666,' as the numerical representation of absolute imperfection). It's one less than 7, the perfect number. Samaria, symbolized in this woman, is *utterly unfulfilled*. Then one day Jesus comes to Jacob's well (IN SAMARIA), and she has at last met her 7th and final lover: this is the husband for whom she has been waiting, and she meets Him at Jacob's well, a place where lovers meet.

The Book of Acts reports that after Philip preached in Samaria, Peter and John had to go up as well to help with all the baptizing. Which makes this a story of a marriage, a reconciliation of worlds. The ancient but severed union of Samaria and Judea, the northern and southern kingdoms, is restored when Jesus sits down at the well with the Samaritan woman. Political, ethnic, and religious enemies are reconciled in the New Way, the Christian church. The preface we will use today hints at this: "When He asked the woman of Samaria for water to drink, Christ had already created the gift of faith within her -- and so ardently did He thirst for her faith, that He kindled in her the fire of divine love."

Jesus reveals His thirst; He 'prepares the way.' He breaks down the wall between peoples the way He always does. She hears the voice of her true love, and opens her heart, and becomes an apostle of the New Way, Christianity. Hearing the voice and remembering who the Lover is, is a big part of this story. Jesus heard the voice at His baptism in the Jordan, and again, with the three apostles on the mount of Transfiguration. The voice that calls Him 'the beloved Son' is the voice to which He is faithful, the voice that he will cling to, when it seems that the voices of hatred, envy, and division have won the day.

"If today you hear His voice, harden not your hearts," we sing today, all of us, to and with our elect throughout the world as they prepare for the Easter sacraments with the first scrutiny. To be Christ today, after hearing this gospel, seems to mean being willing to take the risk, to reveal my thirst for unity and reconciliation, to get out of ruts and taboos and divisions imposed by culture, politics, even religion. If we're doing discernment about our life in community, we ought to be asking ourselves: "Who's not welcome at our well, our church? Who's asking for a drink, and getting pushed away? Who's going to have the courage to call us to our longing for reconciliation, to be vulnerable, and offer the first drink of living water?"

This text challenges us all to ask whether or not we are married to the wrong love. If we get up every morning and go to work, and try to get more power, more money, and have as many possessions as we can so that we have more than all of our neighbors, the husband we have now is not our own. If we can't wait to get

the latest iPhone or computer or smart watch, if we spend all of our time on our devices, then the husband we have now is not our own. If we are obsessed about the holiness and worthiness of others and blind to our own judgmentalism, then the husband we have now is not our own. If we do nothing to support the church because we spend too much on all the goodies for the kids and our homes and our cars, then the husband we have now is not our own. If we are addicted to drugs or alcohol, or anything that lets us avoid truth, the husband we have now is not our own. If we destroy other kids at school because they are not in our clique, if we dis our parents in order to spend time only with our friends, then the husband we have now is not our own. If we are so obsessed with our grades that we will cheat, then the husband we have now is not our own. If we have done nothing to try to allow God to change our heart this Lent, if we have done no almsgiving so as to alleviate the needs of the poor, then the husband we have now is not our own. Let the church say OUCH!

We need to hear again the voice that calls us “My beloved ones,” and be true to that Voice as it reveals all other people to be the same – equally His beloved ones. We need that Voice to break the concrete around our hearts, to soften them so we can better see and love those who are ignored, the ones-passed-by, and learn to do good to those who hate. Ouchtime. It seems so hard. We can’t do it.

But God can. Change our hearts! Create us new! Let us know where the well is that you are waiting for us, for our community – waiting, thirsty and without a bucket. Waiting for us to slake your thirst with our desire for integrity. So many of us are on lover number 6, 66, or 666. Come be our 7th lover. Bring us together again. In this world, today. Amen. (all of this is adapted from Rory Cooney) ***Sychar & Shechem are the same place, perhaps due to a copyist error