

‘I Am the Bread of Life’: Will That Be Rye or Whole Wheat?

Wow, that was a long Gospel reading—What time’s UCONN playing?

Actually, today’s Gospel; that’s the longest recorded conversation Jesus has with anyone.

And by all accounts, it should *never have happened*. This whole encounter would be shocking to an ancient audience. First of all, back then, women and men do not speak together publicly.

Remember what the disciples thought when they found Jesus there at the well? *They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman*. And not only was she a woman, she was a *Samaritan* woman (oh, no, no...). Jews and Samaritans were mortal enemies. Samaritans were once Jews. But they were Jews that had interbred with foreigners after Samaria was conquered by Assyria. So pure-blood Jews despised them. In fact, just setting foot in Samaritan territory made a Jew ritually unclean. And Samaritans, well they returned that hatred. It was not safe for a Jew to enter Samaria. This is enemy territory. Jews risked violence and attack there. Jews headed for Jerusalem went around Samaria. They did not go through. So what the heck is Jesus even doing there? Our reading today from John started at verse 5, but verse 4 says:

“It was necessary that Jesus go through Samaria.”

I’m very surprised the lectionary left that verse out today, because it’s really significant. That phrase ‘it was necessary,’ that’s one word in Greek. *Dei. D-e-i...* And *dei* has deep theological significance. When it’s used in the bible, it refers to God’s will, God’s plan. The only thing that made Jesus’ trip through Samaria ‘necessary,’ was that God ordained it. Jesus has a divine appointment there. And he has a divine appointment with a pretty sketchy lady. At least one with a suspect reputation. We don’t know why, but we do know she’s had five husbands. A woman couldn’t file for divorce back then, but a man could turn a woman out for any reason he felt. So whether she’s a repeat widow, or if she’s been rejected over and over again, we don’t know. But we know the guy she’s living with now, is not her husband. Is she promiscuous, immoral? Maybe. Unlucky? Maybe. Is she unlovable? We don’t know, but whatever the reasons, her life’s a bit of a wreck. And she is definitely a social outcast in her community. Do you remember what time of day she went to the well? [*Around noon*]. Women go to the well first thing in the morning to get the water they need for the day’s work—washing, cooking. Men go to the well for refreshment late in the afternoon, after a long day

working out in the field. No one goes to the well at noon. But she is not welcome among the women of the village. She's seen as low, dirty, not to be trusted. She is shunned. So she goes to the well alone. And who does she meet there? Jesus, of course. Jesus reaches out to her. Jesus violates every social custom. Crosses every cultural convention. He risks his reputation, even his safety, and says to her, *Give me a drink*. But does she fall all over in gratitude? Moved that he'd speak to her? Heck no. She's wary. Cautious. Right away, she throws the barriers up between them. She says 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.)

Remember, just using her cup at the well, that will make him unclean. She knows that. So she's suspicious. Who is this guy? Who is this guy, so quick to throw caution to the wind? And Jesus responds, *You're right... You are right to wonder who I am. Because this isn't about the water. It's about something so much bigger. So much better.*

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."

And thus begins the most confused conversation ever. She doesn't get it, doesn't follow, He's talking *Spirit*. She's talking *buckets and wells*.

It's a big theme in the Gospel of John, this spiritual / physical confusion. Jesus reveals some profound spiritual truth, and *nobody gets it*. Jesus says, 'I am the bread of life,' and people are thinking, 'will that be rye, or whole wheat?' (Nooo).

So Jesus says to the Samaritan woman, *I can give you 'living water,'* And she's like, *Uh... you don't even have a bucket. So you ain't getting water from this deep well? What, you got your own secret well with living, running water? We'll that makes you even better than Jacob, who gave us this well.* (She's scoffing a little). So, patiently, Jesus tries again:

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.

Jesus paints this great image of a gushing artesian spring. Its limitless flowing water a symbol of everlasting life, if never-ending glory in God's kingdom. Does she get it? *No*.

Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to

keep coming here to draw water.

Jesus is offering something so much bigger than the needs of this one brief life. But she thinks he's got a magic well. So finally, he just gives up the metaphor. He gives up the metaphor, and goes right to the heart of things. He goes right to *her* heart, and gets personal:

"Go, call your husband, and come back."

The woman answered him, "I have no husband."

And Jesus said to her... *I know. I know the whole truth.* Well, that breaks the spell of ignorance, doesn't it? No more scoffing. Now, she's really listening. And things are starting to click. But now she's in some scary territory. She's getting closer to God. And getting closer to God puts you on some unfamiliar ground. Puts you out in the bright sun at noon—no place to hide. It makes you vulnerable. Leaves you taking to foreigners and enemies and God knows what else. And you can tell she's scared, because she throws up those barriers again:

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.

She's still caught up in the physical, still caught up in how they're so different, in what divides them. And it scares her. *Sure, you're a prophet, she says. But a prophet of the Jews.*

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... the hour is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth...

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

The mountain, doesn't matter. Samaritan, Jew, doesn't matter. Male, female, doesn't matter. The outside doesn't matter. *Spirit and truth.* What's inside matters. *Spirit and truth.* Heart and soul matter. Relationship matters. Loving God matters. Loving one another matters. *That is true worship.* And that is what God wants.

And the Samaritan woman, she's right there. She's teetering on the edge of faith. And she throws the words out there, almost like a question:

I know that Messiah is coming (who is called Christ),

When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us

And Jesus doesn't disappoint. He tells her simply, *I am he, the one who is speaking to you.*

Now, John's Gospel is just full of symbols and metaphors and words with many levels of meaning. And this is one of those moments. *I am he,* says Jesus. And throughout John, when

Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah, he says it the same way. I am... I am... I am...

Who is The Great I AM? *God*, of course. *Yahweh*. The name means, 'I am.' More specifically, *I am because I am*. And in Hebrew, the verb 'to be' is never about simple existence. It's always about doing, about action. I am, because I live. I am, because I breathe. I am, because I act, I do. 'I am' is about motion, about transformation. When we receive the Spirit of God, something happens. When we start looking beyond the physical realities of our world. And open our eyes to God's reality, things happen, things move. Change happens. Transformation happens.

That Samaritan woman, she's transformed from the 'sketchy lady at the well' to one of the most revered evangelists in Christian history—sainted and celebrated around the world on special feast days. And she wasn't the only one changed. Her whole village, her whole *Samaritan* village became a place of faith and witness. In the Spirit of God, amazing things happen. The message of the Gospel is clear. Getting closer to God, and really doing God's will, that's gonna take us outside our comfort zones, for sure. Whether it's walking down the street, or helping out with our Luther's Lunch program... being true worshippers, being true Christians, is going to bring us face-to-face with folks who make our skin crawl. People we're afraid of—foreign and unfamiliar. Folks who we imagine are low, dirty, and not to be trusted. Just like the Samaritan woman. And we are called to reach out, just like Christ did. We're called to break social conventions, and take risks. Jesus calls us to see past the outside. To drop our prejudices and try to connect. Jesus calls us to open up and trust in *relationship* more than appearances. When we do, we really will be 'spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ,' like our church's mission statement says. When we do, *we will transform* lives: our own, and other peoples'. In Spirit and truth, we *will* change things. Maybe a whole village. maybe the world. Thanks be to God.

Amen.