

# NEXT CHURCH

*The Living Water of Interfaith Dialogue*  
Reflections on John 4

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Sermon and Video Clip Notes  
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Christians hear the account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well and marvel that Jesus, a Jew, would stop and speak with a woman of Samaria, a non-Jew – not to mention a single woman who’s been married multiple times. Preachers like to point out that when the disciples show up they see right away the scandal in Jesus consorting with such a woman. It’s tempting to make this story all about Jesus and his little band of risk-averse men.

But when we look at the encounter at the well from the perspective of the Samaritan woman, we see something else. First of all, *Jesus* is an interloper here, a stranger, not the woman. He’s on her turf, her social, political, cultural, and *religious* turf. It’s *her* well. The well where he comes seeking living water belongs to people of another faith.

This gospel text is not so much a story about Jesus, or even about the woman. *It’s about the well, about the water.* Jesus shows up thirsty, asking for water, for living water, for water to slake his thirst. He looks to the Samaritan woman for help. He expects to receive sustenance from *her* well. She’s there, of course, for the same reason.

*What is it about a well and its water?*

The image of a *well* helps us ponder life in a multi-faith world. The Buddha once said – or maybe it was a Sufi mystic, depending on your source – that if you want to find water you don’t dig six one-foot holes; you dig one six-foot hole.

The well of faith is deep, deeper than any of us know; it helps to ask others at the well what they have drawn from those waters.

Interfaith dialogue has been a part of my ministry for more than thirty years. My faith in Jesus Christ has been made stronger by the experience, and I am a better follower of Jesus because of it.

The church I serve, Westminster, Minneapolis, actively encourages encounters at the well. Outside the door to our sanctuary is a table with three holy books laid open: the Qu'ran, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Christian Bible. They point to the common roots of the faith traditions coming out of the spiritual and life experience Abraham and Sarah.

Every time we come into worship those sacred texts remind us that we walk across a religiously plural landscape in our time, like it or not. The books also signal our congregation's willingness to go to the same well Jesus visited that day in Samaria.

Each Sunday during the season of Lent at Westminster a guest from another faith tradition participates in a dialogue sermon. The theme this year is *forgiveness*. Last year it was *prayer*. We go to the well each week and draw from it, learning from each other. When we have a Muslim imam as a guest the muezzin from his mosque calls us to prayer; when the rabbi comes, the cantor is there as well...

Clip of cantor singing in Hebrew and Muslim call to prayer

The Samaritan woman tells Jesus that the well was used by their ancestor Jacob, the one whose name was later changed to Israel. She's pointing to their shared religious heritage, even though, as the text says, "Jews have nothing in common with Samaritans." Too easily we forget that Christianity has roots in Judaism. The Lord's Prayer, for instance, is a *Jewish* prayer adopted by followers of Jesus, the Jew who taught it.

Clip of Rabbi Marcia Zimmerman on the Lord's Prayer

Some of our fellow religious travelers who come to the well do not believe in prayer at all. Humanists, for instance, see little value in praying to an unconfirmed God. That perspective challenges me and pushes me to deeper exploration of my own prayer life.

Clip of Unitarian minister David Breeden on his not praying

Humanists, with their skepticism, force us to get real about our Christianity, to account for our faith, and that's good. We can no longer simply go through the motions. Interfaith dialogue sharpens our understanding of God. That was happening at the well that day, between Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

“May I have some of that water?” Jesus asks her. She will shortly ask him the same question, but he starts. They’re having an inter-religious dialogue at the well, exchanging wisdom from their traditions, each sharpening the practice of their own faith.

Religion can become so dry, so parched, that it has little life left in it. Our practice of prayer can be so dehydrated that our faith soon withers. *That’s when we should go to the well.* When a neighbor draws water from that deep well, watching that happen can enlighten us and enliven our own faith.

Clip of Imam Makram El-Amin on using the body in prayer.

“Bringing my best self to God.” The well is deep, indeed.

The key to good interfaith work is friendship. At the well that day, Jesus and the woman treat each other with respect. They’re beginning a friendship by the time the disciples get back and want to intervene to cut it off. They’re acting like little Pharisees, trying to keep Jesus within the lines of “proper” religion. We do the same thing to Jesus all the time.

Unless we know one another and genuinely care for each other – which is what Jesus and the woman at the well were doing that day – our efforts at interfaith relationships will succumb to the challenges inherent in trying to live with people of different religious traditions, and we will try to keep the eater at the well to ourselves alone.

There’s a lot at stake here. Interfaith dialogue is not an extra-curricular activity for the church. In these troubled times, when so much divides us, our nation and the peoples of the world, communities from different faith traditions can offer an alternative to erecting barriers and building walls.

Jesus does not shut down the woman at the well. He does not send her away. He does not silence her. He seeks her help. He shows respect. He listens. Interfaith dialogue begins like that, not with fear or with bullying or with competition.

Several years ago the Minneapolis downtown interfaith clergy group traveled together to Jerusalem, Bethlehem and the Galilee. One day in Tiberias four of us got up early and took a long walk along the Sea of Galilee. We reached a beach outside town just as the sun was beginning to rise over the Golan Heights in Syria. We stopped and stood in stunned silence at the beauty and power and serenity of that scene, each of us in our own religious reverie at the holiness of the moment.

There we were, a Jewish rabbi, an African-American Baptist pastor, a Muslim imam, and a white Presbyterian minister. The Baptist invited us to join hands – of course it was the Baptist – and we did.

Clip of Imam El-Amin on his experience at the Sea of Galilee

God intends for us to live together, in justice and in peace. As one community. As one human family living together across all the lines that would otherwise keep us apart. Many of those lines are rooted in religious tribalism.

Clip of Rabbi Zimmerman on the value of interfaith in 21<sup>st</sup> c.

We cannot control the well. We cannot keep its waters to ourselves. We should not think the well is ours alone.

What we *can* do is join others in drawing deeply from the living water of that holy well, that God's intentions for the human family might be nourished among us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.