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Who do you say that I am?

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John 4:4-29, 39-42

I am taking a break from the lectionary this morning. We'll return to Matthew's gospel next week, but today we're going to visit John's gospel.

I've been your pastor for 2 months now. That time seems both long and short to me. Has it only been two months? Yet I feel like I've known you forever. I am learning your names and beginning to learn your stories. And I want to thank you for that. When you share your story with me, it is a gift I treasure. Because I know that behind each face in the congregation are stories of joy and sorrow, celebration and grief. And this morning, I'd like to share a bit more of my story with you. And it will be for many of you, I suspect, a surprising story. So, after worship, or in the next weeks, please come talk with me about it. In an ideal world, all stories are shared one on one, and not one-on-one hundred and fifty.

So we go to John, my favorite gospel.

I am the woman at the well.

To look at my life today, it might not be so easy for you to connect me with her.

I have not had five husbands. And I can gather my water in the cool of the morning with the other women. Socially and politically, I know I am not a Samaritan.

I am probably more of a Pharisee or something, or at least the wife of a Pharisee, someone on the inside of society's gifts.

But I haven't always been defined by being a pastor, or by my marriage to a caring and liberated man, or by my two wonderful children and Siamese cat. When I was in college, I was defined instead by my sin.

That's how I saw it then.

To make a ridiculously long story short, I got pregnant my sophomore year of college at Trinity University in San Antonio, TX.

I didn't wear a scarlet letter on my clothing, but I didn't need to. I was the "pregnant girl" that year, swelling belly leading me wherever I went.

Luckily for me, I encountered Jesus that year. Not the Jesus of my Sunday school and conventional American moralism. I did not encounter *that* Jesus, who was lurking in the back of my head, disappointed that I had sinned, ready to judge me.

Instead, thankfully, I encountered the Jesus who knew everything I had ever done, and loved me anyway.

Where did I meet this Jesus?

I met this Jesus at church, of all places. I had been preparing to join University Presbyterian Church when all of this went down. I went to the pastor and told him that perhaps this wasn't the best time, after all, for me to join. After I wept in his office and told him almost everything I had ever done, the pastor said to me, "when could be a better time to join a church?" This church--which I am sure was scandalized, on some level, by this unwed teenager in their midst—this church was like the disciples in our Bible text. They might have been surprised that Jesus would have been talking to me, but they didn't say anything about it. They fed me. They gave me maternity clothes. They visited me in the hospital. They had me stand up on Mother's Day in worship.

I also met this Jesus at my university. While there were people who would have liked me to take my water jar and go to a different well altogether, most people made room for me. Boys offered to type my papers, carried my books, took me out for dinner to make sure I was eating enough. My sorority sisters expected me to remain an active member of the club, even though I was worried that my presence would ruin the reputation of the club. My professors made allowances for me and had the grace to encourage my intellect at a time when most all else was out of my control.

And because I met this Jesus, I now call "blessing" what I used to call "sin". I placed my son up for adoption. Eric is now 19 years old and a sophomore at TCU in Fort Worth. My boys get to know their brother and it is a gift for me to see them all together. I am blessed to be a part of his life and would love to tell you more about him. Adoption has touched our lives in a beautiful way, allowing blessing to come from pain.

And, because I received the gift of living water from Jesus at the well—the gift that came to me in the form of grace, acceptance, love and support from my family, my community of faith, and my college community—I was able to leave my jar there by the side of the well and have been able to go and tell everyone about the man who knew everything I have ever done.

And who loves me anyway.

Before I met Jesus, I was often to be found at the well of self-reliance. I would go every day and fill my jar with the illusion that I could solve any problem, take care of myself, and didn't need others to get through life. Truth be told, I don't think I even thought I needed God. I was a "good girl". I believed that Jesus was God's son, but I acted as if the gift of life through the cross event was for others because if I could be good enough to take care of myself, then God would be freed up to take care of the people who really needed help.

But Jesus has this way of shattering illusions. When he quietly makes his statement at the well, it becomes apparent that he isn't fooled. When he tells the woman to go and bring back her husband, she realizes he knows who she is deep down inside. And not just the person she projects.

I wonder what went through her mind as she realized he truly knew her. Was there a pause as she considered her answer?

Did it occur to her to say, "He's working late at the office. I'm not expecting him back for a while."

Did it occur to her to get angry with this stranger who was messing into her personal life? "How dare you ask me for a drink and then insult me?!"

But all John records for us in the text was her answer. "I have no husband."

Because when you encounter someone who sees you as you really are and then engages your best self, the truth is the only answer to give. We can fool each other, and we do. We can put on our best face when we come to church, and we do. But God is not fooled. God knows who we really are and loves us anyway.

So, what I hope you hear is this: if there is ANY place where you can bring your TRUE self, it is to church.

What jar are you carrying around that you could perhaps set down? Because we do that, we keep taking our jars to the wrong wells, and we keep running out of water. We go to the wells of acceptance or popularity. We go to the wells of compromise, or anxiety, or fear. We go to the wells of self reliance or the well of "everything is just fine".

Jesus gives the Samaritan woman the gift of living water, and frees her from the daily task of coming to a well that will not satisfy. When I was in college, in the midst of my pain, I encountered him as well. Leaving my jar is what freed me to embark on the path to ministry.

Because, like the other woman at the well, I encountered someone who gave me such grace, I have had no other option but to keep running back to the city, telling everyone I meet all about him.

"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

Yes. He is. A messiah of Grace, and Truth, and Life.

Amen