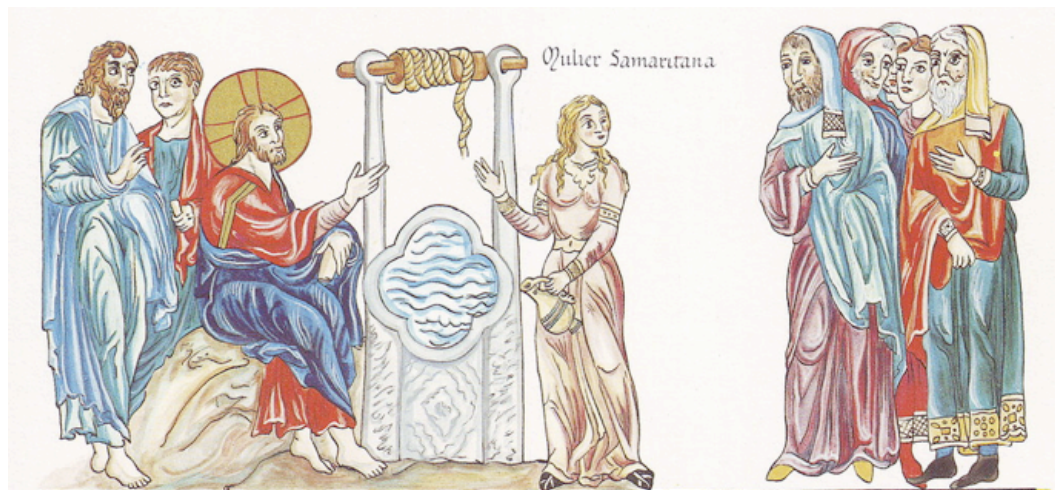


# at the well

Robert Steiner



Scripture Reading: John 4:1-30

*"By night, we hasten, in darkness,  
to search for living water,  
only our thirst leads us onward."*

*Let thirst be our light*

The opening quote is a translation of the well known Spanish Taizé Chant "De Noche", based on a poem by Luis Rosales. Rosales's poem is inspired by the mystic St John of Cross, who suggests that our thirst has the capacity to lead us onward in the same way as light is able to show us the way forward at night. To be guided by a deeper thirst for life is to trust one's pain because things are not the way they should be. It is to trust one's yearning for greater fulfillment and peace. But it also requires the kind of conversations that allow us to get in touch with that inner thirst and to be able to name the pain and yearning that makes us thirsty, restless and searching.

Henri Nouwen identifies a few key qualities that such a conversation would have to exhibit:

"Somewhere we know that without silence words lose their meaning, that without listening speaking no

longer heals, that without distance closeness cannot cure." Reading and interpreting a Gospel story is not unlike such a conversation and also calls for silence, listening, and distance. To be silent before the text is to make space for those voices that are silenced in the text, but also within ourselves. And there is often a connection between the two. To be listening before the text is to become aware of the specific context that surrounds the Gospel story and to become aware of the assumptions that we bring to the text. To allow for a certain distance in the act of interpretation is to protect the text from saying what we want it to say, is to make sure that the strangeness and otherness of the text is not lost.

*A gentle protest*

The story of the Samaritan woman at the well begins with a shared thirst for fresh water which leads into a conversation around a deeper thirst for life. It is a thirst that cannot be quenched with water from a well, but requires "living water" which Jesus has come to offer. It is a shared thirst that leads to a crossing of barriers of gender, culture, and religion, to

the discovery that ultimately we are all drinking from the same well. It is an insight that comes to those who allow their thirst to lead them to worship God "in Spirit and in truth". Such worship is independent of competing places of worship, independent of the temple in Jerusalem or the holy mountain Garizim, independent of Rome or Mekka. We need more conversations like this at the different wells around the world. If only a deeper thirst for life and the recognition of our common humanity would help bring those together who for political and/or religious reasons oppose each other. The ongoing conflict between Palestinians and Israelis comes to mind; the need for more dialogue between Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. The Cape Town Interfaith Initiative has identified the need for a "sacred space" for respectful dialogue and started to develop the plans for an interfaith centre. Such a centre would resemble the well in our story, inviting honest conversations around our common thirst and paving the path that leads to a worship of God "in Spirit and in truth".

The conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus has all the ingredients of an interreligious dialogue: suspicion, curiosity, misunderstanding, and surprise. Their dialogue has to be understood against the background of a long history of deep animosity and hatred between Jews and Samaritans - despite all the things they have in common: the belief in the same God, a long shared history, and the five books of Moses as their sacred texts. The mosaic poignantly depicts Jesus and the Samaritan woman in the midst of two opposing factions. The woman's body is turned towards Jesus, but her head is turned towards what must be the elders of her village. She takes on a mediating role which is re-inforced by her position in the centre of the composition. Jesus is portrayed as offering her moral support. His gaze is on the Samaritan elders and his right hands seems to point to the woman, lifting her into the role of being an example to the others. The facial expressions and gestures of both factions, made up of Jesus' disciples and the Samaritan elders and framing the image, display different emotions and attitudes, ranging from curiosity and surprise to disgust and shock.

This is one of the sad tragedies of the history of religion that even within one and the same religion opposing groups have fought and killed each other, and in some parts of the world continue to do so. We think of the fierce fights between Catholics and Protestants in the post-reformation era in Europe; or the ongoing rivalry and animosity between Shiites and

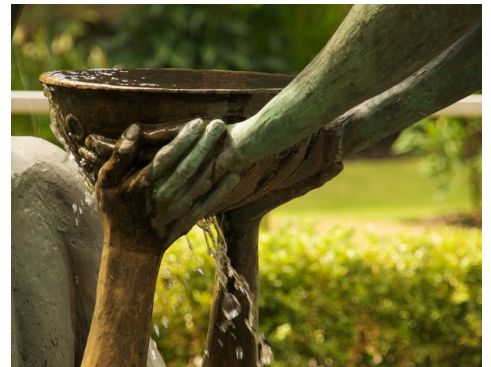
Sunnis within Islam. We tend to forget that the majority of those who suffer under the attacks of the Islamic State are Muslims themselves. The bitter irony of John's Gospel is of course, that it displays such openness and welcome to the religious other side by side with an unsettling anti-Judaism that reflects the growing enmity between the early Church and the Synagogue. It fuelled later expressions of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism leading to programs sanctioned by the Church.

And yet, there are always a few who dare to cross boundaries and do not allow stereotypes and prejudice to stop them. Gerd Theissen notes that we should not be surprised that in our story a woman crosses significant boundaries. In the New Testament women play a prominent role in daring to overcome age old barriers. Think of the Syrophenician woman in Mark's Gospel. She is the first gentile to make contact with Jesus. And it is thanks to her insistence that Jesus heals her daughter and learns about the wideness of God's grace, which wants to reach beyond the boundaries of Israel. Think of Lydia, the trader of purple cloths in the Acts of the Apostle. It is at a river outside of Philippi that she becomes the first among the Greeks to become a Christian. And in our story of this morning the Samaritan woman becomes the first apostle to bring the good news to her fellow Samaritans.

Theissen refers to our story as a "gentle protest" against the harsh realities of prejudice and hatred which keep creating divisions

among people of different cultural, political, or religious background. This protest is centered around a well which takes on different meanings as the story unfolds.

*The well as a place of encounter*



It was at a well that Isaac proposed to Rebecca. It was at a well that Moses met Zippora and Jacob was introduced to Rachel. Wells were shimmering with erotic associations and offered opportunities to meet and get to know each other. The sculpture of two hands touching each other in the common embrace of a bowl of water alludes to the sensuality involved in some of those encounters. The offering of water becomes a gesture of affection and love. We notice the confusion and irritation of the disciples when they see Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman. Would they have been able to hold back with their criticism, if they would have known that he spoke to her about her private and intimate life? What would have been their reaction if they would have overheard that this woman was married five times and that her present partner is not her husband? But Jesus is not afraid of any ambiguity.

Let people think what they want to think. His intentions are clear and transparent. There is no reservation towards or judgement of the woman when he talks to her about her five husbands. There are also no insinuations of sexual promiscuity. She suffered an unusual fate. We can only imagine the pain and marginalisation that comes with losing your husband five times, either through death or divorce, within the oppressive constraints of patriarchy. Her first words to those in the village are telling about the nature of this encounter: "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did." His knowing of her did not shame or humiliate her. It rather empowered her to accept her own life story and discover a new calling. It is to her that Jesus first reveals himself as the mysterious "I am". And as the Gospel continues to unfold the "I am" grows in meaning and purpose: I am the bread of life, the light of the world, the vine, the good shepherd, the resurrection, the way, the truth, and the life. And Jesus becomes all of this in so far as he fully embodies God's love for the world.

The first letter of John suggests such mystical union as a key characteristic of discipleship: "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them." (1 John 3:16) One cannot find a more affirming and inclusive statement in the New Testament. It builds bridges across old divides and invites us to think of love as the "living water" which is able to still our thirst for peace on earth.

We are given a first indication of what it means to worship God "in Spirit and in truth". It happens whenever we find the courage



to counter prejudice and hatred in the name of a God who invites us to dwell in love. It is not the kind of love that cancels out our differences. But it insists that there is only one God and that we all drink from the same well. Our differences should therefore not be used to debase or discriminate the religious other. There is a divine love that wants us to transcend those differences for the sake of peace. Indeed, wherever people are able to cross such old divides and find each other dwelling in the same love, God is worshiped "in Spirit and in truth".

#### *The well as a place of work and conflict*

Theissen points out how the Gospel of John, known for its specific mystical approach to faith, keeps opening up windows into the harsh realities of daily life. In that sense, it cannot be a coincidence that the story's starting point are basic material needs that need to be met. Where do we find water and where do we get food? And so while the disciples are on their way to organize food, Jesus asks for

water at the well. Having experienced a long draught we know that water is not simply there. And in Jesus times water had to be fetched from wells. And we know with so many school children still going hungry to school, that food is not simply there, but for many of our fellow citizens to have one meal a day is already a tremendous blessing. In our story Jesus is portrayed as someone who also has basic needs and is dependent on others to provide for him. He is not self-sufficient, but needy and dependent on the generosity and care of others. In other words, wells are not just meeting places for romantic encounters and for sharing the latest gossip. They are first of all places of work and hardship: In many places women and children still have to fetch water and walk long distances in the heat of the day. Water isn't just there. And it has been said that future wars will not be about oil, but about water.



Water isn't just there. And when there are limited resources of water it matters who owns the well. And so as the conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus is in full swing she makes it very clear that this well was made by their father Jacob, who had given it to them. At this moment religion enters the conversation. And it is used to make claims of ownership over limited resources. The well belongs to Jacob. He gave it to us, the Samaritan woman says. We see how also in the Old Testament wells are not just romantic meeting places, but highly contested possessions for which people were willing to fight (see 1 moses 21:22-34). Ownership of wells had to be defended, justified, and legitimated. This was done at times violently, at other times simply by drawing on one's religious tradition: Such religious legitimation of claims to land and water and other basic goods that are vital for one's survival continue to be part of people's and nations' history. Think of the many places of conflict in the world at the moment. Very often religion is used to justify claims to own and control the land, and to help people have a good conscience in the battles of distribution of precious resources.

In other words, to worship God "in Spirit and in truth" happens when people let go of making religious claims to land and water and are able to meet the God who takes our material needs seriously, but transcends all attempts to say this is mine and this is yours. If God is the giver of all of life and the creator of all, then what we have is a gift given to all to be shared as needed, so that no one suffers hunger or thirst. As long as one doesn't see this, one will always

remain thirsty for more water, more land, more power, more wealth. But there is another thirst, a thirst for more justice, that Jesus has come to awaken within us and which can be stilled within those who worship God "in Spirit and truth."

*the well as a place symbolic of our spiritual journey*

What becomes clear in our story: As long as the Samaritan woman stays at that level of reasoning and interpreting, she will not understand Jesus. They will miss each other. Jesus does not think of the physical well when he speaks of "living water". And he does not mean to refer to Jacob, when he speaks about the giver of all water of life. And this is a recurring theme in John's Gospel: People misunderstand Jesus, because they are stuck and trapped in a particular way of seeing and interpreting the world.

He counters her religious argument regarding ownership of the well with inviting her to consider a much deeper well. The "living water" he is offering to her reads in the original Greek as "spring water". Hence the promise is not just one of water, but one of an actual spring within her, an unending supply of water. Later in chapter four of John's Gospel Jesus would clarify the symbolism of "living water": It represents an energy which bestows a new quality of life, described as "eternal life" (John 4:13) Again in chapter seven Jesus comes back to the gift of "living water" seen to be "flowing from within" and now identified as a symbol for God's Spirit. (John 7:38-39)

What an extraordinary claim and promise though! It invites us not to look for God outside of ourselves, but rather deep within ourselves and to imagine God as an eternal spring of Spirit. It resonates with Teresa of Avila's *Inner Castle* (as explored a few Sundays ago) and her understanding that the search for our true selves and our quest for God consist in one and the same journey. It also echoes Jung's conviction that there are deep, life-giving reservoirs, healing images and energies within our own soul, which we need to tap into.





The soul is not just a dump, as Freud argued, for our repressed and denied experiences of life. To worship God "in Spirit and in truth" is to know the divine spring that dwells within us and to trust that the journey inwards will bring us not only closer to our true self, but also to the one who created us in his or her image. Sieger Koeder captures this idea with having the Samaritan woman look deep into the well until she is able to see the reflection of her own face at the bottom of the well. But she is not repeating the tragedy of the Greek myth of Narcissus. Her recognition does not lead to a destructive obsession with herself. She recognizes another face beside her own reflected in the pool, dwelling deep within her own soul. It is the face of the one who speaks to her and invites her to trust a deeper well, a divine spring within herself.

### *A greater thirst*

I started off with reflecting on what it means to be guided by thirst and how the well as a physical reality revealed different kinds of thirsts. And while the thirst for actual water plays an important role in the story, it does at the same time

become the starting point for a deeper thirst that touches on issues of love, of land, of power, of control, and of justice. To worship God „in Spirit and truth“ is to confront all those issues boldly and to cross cultural, political and religious boundaries in order to find the well from which we all drink.

The Cape Town poet Shabbir Banoobhai captures this ever deepening quest we are on in one of his poems on water:

"when water would suffice  
to quench my thirst  
you offer me the choice  
of greater thirst"

Amen.