

How Many Husbands We've Really Had [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
John 4:5—42; Exodus 17:1—7

I need to begin this morning with a confession. And my confession is, although I have been a husband to Sheryl for almost 39 years, prior to our wedding date and over the course of our marriage, I have had around *five husbands*. Now, if that shocks you, I'm sorry. But please allow me to explain.

Jesus, in John's Gospel, does what he always does. He takes an ordinary, everyday, common thing—something we take for granted—and he invites us to take a leap. And the leap this morning takes us from the literal water in this historic well *towards* the experience of “**Living Water**.” That's what Jesus does. And, you see, if he does that with *water*, it's also possible that he's doing that with another word he uses in John 4:16, 17 & 18:

“Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back. The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband...”

Husband? No Husband? No Husband. Five Husbands. Not Your Husband Now. And so, here's how I'm interpreting what's going on. *A husband* is not a literal husband. *A husband* is a dubious commitment, or maybe it's a choice that's been made for you, or maybe it's a desire that never quite satisfies, or maybe it's a curious infatuation that doesn't pan out. *A husband* symbolizes. *A husband* epitomizes. Biblically-speaking, *a husband* includes the sad reality that you and I and the Samaritans may have been misled—and that all that we had hoped would fulfill us actually ends up disappointing us.

Now, at this point, you may be getting tired of all the metaphors; but I'm going to stick with them—primarily because the Bible is saturated with metaphorical language—and secondarily because Jesus embraces these types of imaginative comparisons at every turn... But the other reason I have for sticking with the metaphor of 'HUSBAND' in today's passage is personal; and I wonder if any of you, in any way, can relate: the only model I had of being *a husband* was my father—who returned home from work one evening and sat at the kitchen table with my mother. I was twelve and needed Mom's attention for something. The interruption to their conversation triggered him and, pointing to my mother, he said to me, "Hey, that's mine; you get your own!", And so, through the years and through a lot of good therapy, I've had to ask, 'IS THAT WHAT A HUSBAND IS?' Is a husband the one *owns, who controls, who traumatizes* and who ostensibly *worries that there won't be enough love*? I don't think so. But unfortunately, it's only a hop, a skip and a jump until people like me (and you) start to wonder about the character of God: *Is God LIKE the Husband who owns and controls and only has so much love to go around?*

"Therefore I will now allure her and bring her into the wilderness..."

This is what the God of Israel had been saying to a people of faith all along... even in spite of their unfaithfulness. Hosea, chapter two, gives us the image of God as Husband. The Creator of the Cosmos chooses and intends to take a particular (Hebrew) people as his bride and to become vulnerable to the possibility of rejection...

"and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. On that day, says the LORD, you will call me 'My Husband...'"

You see, this is all very romantic and seductive. But if we're not careful listeners we'll miss the point. And the point is that which Jesus says to the Samaritan woman so many centuries later he's also saying to us here and now. And that is—WE HAVE HAD *OTHER HUSBANDS*.

“What you’ve said is true,” Jesus declares. The “husband” you have now is NOT your husband. Not even close. Those other husbands—whoever they were—whatever they were—have tried to own and control and dominate you. And so, LET’S HAVE THAT CONVERSATION. That’s what Jesus wants. The only question is—where and when we’re going to have it. Last week, you may recall, Jesus had his conversation—packed with metaphors of water, being born from above and the wind blowing where it will—and this week there’s another one. Last week, Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel, walked away still shaking his head. This week, the Samaritan woman has a different response. She stays in the conversation. Even when it appears Jesus has crossed a personal boundary, she stays with him: ***“Sir, I see that you are a prophet.”*** But think about this response: Is it because Jesus has called her out as if she were Elizabeth Taylor? Is it because he wants to expose the salacious details to the National Inquirer?

I don’t think so—in that she never goes to get the alleged husband; and Jesus never condemns her for fornication, adultery or divorce. Moreover, the woman immediately launches into a theological discussion about worship—and how her ancestors worship on Mount Gerizim and how Galilean Jews like Jesus worship in Jerusalem. The transition doesn’t make sense ... unless HUSBAND IS A METAPHOR—unless she’s picking up on the metaphor employed by the prophet, Hosea, had been using for God. Jesus, she thinks, is a prophet like him.

But maybe more. And key to this whole conversation is that this Samaritan—this woman—perseveres in it. Will we? The Reverent Fred Rogers, a minister in the Presbyterian Church, became famous as Mr. Rogers; and during his public-television broadcasts, Mister Roger’s Neighborhood, he emphasized being fully present to the child, any child, who may be watching him; and during the course of his career he would encourage that child to talk through anything that might be going on in their lives. And so, I was watching a 2019 film called, *“It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood,”* which depicts one of those children. Lloyd Vogul just happens to be a fully grown adult, married to Patricia, with a child of his own; but as a cynical writer for *Esquire Magazine*, he sets out to write an expose-piece on the real Mister Rogers, which will really prove that practices like empathy and compassion and forgiveness are just cheesy gimmicks. Anyway, as Mister Rogers doesn’t just sit down for an interview, but actually shows an interest in Lloyd, the dynamic changes; and at one point, Mister Rogers discovers that Lloyd is carrying a bitter grudge against his father because “Jerry” (he calls his father) had abandoned his family when Mom came down with cancer. And at one point, in a fit of frustration, the writer says, “I’m here to interview you, Mister Rogers.” But, you see, it’s not an interview. It’s a conversation that needs to happen. And it needs to happen because Lloyd is carrying the angry burden of a father who never really behaved like a good father, and the sadness of a husband who never really loved like a good husband... Over the course of this true story, however, Mister Rogers prays for everyone by name—and these aren’t just perfunctory or gossipy prayers. They are the prayer-conversations with the God who doesn’t mind being referred to as **“My Husband,”** and who wants to hear all about those ‘false’ ideas of God that we need to surrender.

So pay attention: If we're looking to God as some women look to their husbands for total protection from the cruel world, that's not who God is in Christ. If we're looking to God because we want God to bring home the bacon—that's not who God is in Christ. If we're looking to God to go around the house and fix what's broken while we do the laundry and wipe down the countertops—that's not the relationship the TRUE HUSBAND of ours truly wants. And if we're looking to God to be the Macho Man, the Brutal Master of the Universe, we need to stop drinking the Kool Aid of the Culture and start drinking the *Living Water* that's "***gushing up to eternal life...***"

Again, I want to emphasize: if this passage in John's Gospel is referring to a literal husband, and Jesus commands her to go and get him, why does she never do that? And if this is about the individual woman's lack of morality, why does Jesus never ask her to repent of adultery or fornication or divorce? This story is about outsiders who are willing to stay in the conversation:

"God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth. The woman said to him, 'I know the Messiah is coming (who is called Christ). When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he,' the one who is speaking to you."

And check out what happens next. What happens next is what sometimes happens with us. The disciples—the one's who had gone into the city to buy food—come back without much of anything because the harvest hasn't come in. And they interrupt the conversation. They interrupt at the very moment when Jesus has announced how God—as the *True Husband*—wants us to live. Do we do that? Do we interpret with logistics? Do we interpret the conversation that Jesus wants to have with trivia? Who's going to bring the casserole? Who picks the hymns?

And yet, in verse 29, the woman's not dissuaded: ***"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"*** Notice here: the question. Notice how she opens up the wondrous possibility. Notice how she seems free from the earlier, more sectarian, opinions about her Samaritan religion. She doesn't have to be right. Just as Jesus had engaged her in a mutual dialogue, she's offering the same space. And, you see, this is what induces me to make the comparison with what's happening here at Northwood Presbyterian. Are we going to be a community that opens up to the questions? Or do we have to be right? Are we going to free ourselves from opinions, innuendo—and salacious gossip—so that people—*other people*—can enter into this Spirit-filled conversation?

Later, as Jesus debriefs his encounter with the disciples, they keep asking him why he was talking with this Samaritan and this woman while they, apparently, we're busy trying to forage for food when the harvest is still four months off. And in reply, listen to this from verse 28: ***"I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."*** Collaboration. In other words, she has already been putting in the work. She's already been co-laboring, praying and thinking and wondering. And now, she's not isolated with her nostalgia for Jacob's Well; she goes to the city and she does what Jesus has shown her. She opens herself up to vulnerable conversation: ***"He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"*** Collaboration. Jesus himself isn't doing all the work. And neither, it turns out, is she. The city people eventually respond: ***"They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.'"***

And again, this is an open question for those of us who draw “water” here at Northwood Presbyterian Church. Is this a conversation we are willing to have? Do we want to acknowledge the false and phony husbands we’ve had—and I think we’ve had a lot of them, haven’t we? Even so, Jesus wants to talk. Will we hear him for ourselves?