

March 19, Third Sunday in Lent

John 4:5-42

by [David R. Lyle](#) in the [March 1, 2017](#) issue

I have been reading the first Harry Potter book to my daughter at bedtime. It had been a while since I'd read of young Harry's entry into the wizarding world, and many fond memories have bubbled up to the surface. As we got deeper into the book, however, something began to bother her. Before Hermione emerges as a main character, she's just Harry's classmate and a bit of a know-it-all—and she got on my daughter's nerves.

So it was with great delight that we reached the end of chapter 10. After a harrowing encounter with a troll, we see the effect upon Hermione, Harry, and Ron:

There was a very embarrassed pause. Then, none of them looking at each other, they all said “Thanks,” and hurried off to get plates. But from that moment on, Hermione Granger became their friend. There are some things you can't share without ending up liking each other, and knocking out a twelve-foot mountain troll is one of them.

My daughter thrilled in the moment, and so did I. I'm so familiar with the whole Harry Potter universe that I had forgotten that there was a time before Hermione knew Harry and Ron would be her friends. She was alone, an outsider, and she had no reason to believe this would change. And then it did change.

The scene that plays out in John 4 has a similar effect upon readers. We know the full arc of Jesus' story. We know that he came for all people, with preferential treatment for those alone on the margins. But there was a time before the lonely and the marginalized had any way of knowing this. There was a time before you and I knew it, too.

John's narrative drives us back to this point in the story. The unnamed woman comes to the well with no reason to expect anything in her life to change. As a

Samaritan, a woman, and a person who has been married multiple times, she has at least three reasons not to hope that Jesus might have anything to offer her.

Jesus shows her that God is up to something new. The encounter begins with what may seem an ordinary request. Jesus asks her for a drink. She sees this for what it is, however, a transgression of boundaries. When she demurs, Jesus seizes the opportunity to speak of a different kind of water, one that slakes every thirst and gushes up eternal life for all who drink of it.

Jesus pushes the conversation ahead, speaking of a time when the rifts between God's people will be healed, when true worship will be centered neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. They, and by implication all people, will worship together in spirit and truth. The woman has some inkling of where he's headed. She too has been waiting for the Messiah. It is in this moment that the plot turns, and with it the entire arc of history: "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

From this moment on, the woman's story changes. Her life shifts, claimed now for the kingdom that Jesus has come to enact. She was an outsider, but no longer. She was alone; now she is part of the family of God, gifted and welcomed with living water. In this encounter, John invites us to forget for a moment that we know the rest of the story. Instead, we stand unknowing alongside this woman, thrilling in this moment of a once-forgotten person hearing that she is loved and valued—that the Messiah has not only come, but has come *for her*.

As we delight in this moment, we are called anew to the work entrusted to us by Jesus. For one thing, we are reminded not to react like the disciples. John, as narrator, gives voice to their unspoken thoughts: "Why are you speaking with her?" Too often these thoughts roll through our minds. Yes, Jesus, we know you love all people, but surely you don't mean people like that!

There is a deeper calling here, however, one that pierces our preconceived notions of God's love and our misremembering of the story. It moves beyond theories and theologies of the gospel and reminds us that the love of God in Christ Jesus is for all people, especially those who have yet to hear these saving words of Jesus, a Messiah for all people.

There are still people at the well in the midday heat, those written off by society, looking in from the outside. The gospel drives us toward them with a word of hope that transcends race, gender, nationality, marital status, and anything else the world

would use to separate us. In Christ, all such division is transcended and healed. We are sent to those who yearn to have their long thirst satisfied.

The story many of us know so well is the very thing that so many are yearning to hear. The people of God are called to welcome others to these life-giving baptismal waters. As we do, we will delight in their joy as they learn that they are not alone. They are loved, by God and by us. After all, there are some things you can't share without ending up liking each other, and this is never more true than when we share the gushing, God-given water of life.