

March 8, Lent 3A (John 4:5–42)

Jesus' opening approach to the woman at the well is one that confesses his own need.

by [Serena Rice](#) in the [March 2026](#) issue

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Like many churches, the congregation where I serve runs a small food pantry, stocked with contributions from our members and friends in the larger community. There are a number of local families whom we serve fairly regularly, but in the last year we have been getting visits from more people who are newly struggling. I have noticed a theme in my conversations with first-time visitors to the pantry. They insist that they have never come to a food pantry before, and there is an undertone of shame in this confession. They explain that they have always worked, or they provide unrequested details about the economic crisis that brought them to this point, as though hunger were not an adequate reason for my congregation to want to feed them. Often, they will make a promise that once they get back on their feet they will donate to the pantry, as a way of paying back the assistance.

I am always willing to compassionately receive whatever stories a visitor wants to share with me. But I grieve at this instinct to justify the need for help. Of course, American culture has a long history of distinguishing between the “worthy” and “unworthy” poor, so this instinct is not surprising. Especially because it reflects a much broader cultural dynamic: a general discomfort with interdependence and its associated vulnerability.

The myth of American individualism and bootstrapping independence stands in stark contrast to the incarnational story of Jesus. Jesus chose vulnerability by taking on fragile human flesh. He chose a life of dependence as an itinerant preacher, supported by a few female disciples and the hospitality of whoever received him. His experience of need and of receiving care is an important aspect of his incarnation, enabling him to truly know our human struggles.

I believe it is also an important element of his ability to reach unexpected people. In his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus must overcome a number of barriers to interaction, much less to genuine, vulnerable conversation. Their contrasting genders, ethnic identities, faiths, and social roles all discourage them from speaking to each other. In the face of these barriers, Jesus' opening approach to her is one that confesses his own need: he asks her for a drink.

It is a simple request, but in that very simplicity it shows his willingness to admit his vulnerability. Water is one of our most fundamental survival needs, and Jesus has no tool with which to draw a drink for himself. So he asks her for help, and in doing so he shows that he is not too proud to confess his need for her assistance. When the woman understandably challenges him about the social barriers between them, he then invites her into a parallel confession. Just as she has something that he needs, so he has something that she needs: living water. There is no shame or conflict in this truth; there is rather an opportunity for interdependence.

Given the messianic claim that Jesus makes later in this conversation, we would not expect vulnerability to be his starting point. He is claiming an unprecedented authority. Human institutions and expectations link authority with invulnerability and power. But perhaps it is Jesus' willingness to begin the dialogue with his own need that makes the woman willing to hear him and willing to expose her own vulnerability. First she mirrors his request,

asking for the living water he describes. Then, when he tells her to bring her husband to the well, she makes another vulnerable admission that she has no husband. Jesus receives this trust in the same spirit, naming the truth of her complicated history without judgment, merely affirming the truth in what she says.

Jesus engages her vulnerability with affirmation, and this may be what gives her the courage to respond with a request for teaching. She is trusting him to take her question seriously and to treat her as someone who has the right to engage him in a thorny theological debate. This is a different kind of vulnerability, not the confession of need but rather a bid for respect. And again, Jesus honors it. He invites her to embrace a future where neither of their inherited faiths wins the argument because God's plan is for so much more. And when she leans in, connecting his proclamation to her own sacred teachings, Jesus honors her with his own trust. He confesses to her—the first person to whom Jesus himself makes this claim in John's Gospel—that he is the expected Messiah.

This whole interaction reveals the power that vulnerability offers to open up space for connection, trust, and learning. In a context where social expectations discourage any form of interaction, and where personal history lays landmines for shame, we instead find a growing trust and depth of sharing. We can only wonder how the church might embrace more vulnerability in our efforts to open connections to our neighbors.