

## **“How am I Limiting Myself?”**

John 4:5-30, 39-42

(dramatic presentation with script based on *The Message* translation – attached at end)

*Come ye sinners poor and needy,  
sick and sore,  
Jesus ready stands to save you,  
full of pity, love, and power.  
Come ye thirsty...come ye weary,  
heavy laden...  
if you tarry till you're better,  
you will never come at all.<sup>1</sup>*

If there is any “secret” to becoming a Christian...it can be found in the last phrase of that song, “*if you tarry till you're better, you will never come at all.*” The truth of our faith...the gift of Christ...is that we can “*arise and go to Jesus*” just as we are.

In fact, the disciples were commanded to “arise and go to Jesus” just as they were...still stinky from fishing...still with illegal tax-collector’s money jangling in their pockets. Jesus didn’t look them over, hand them a list of things to do to get their act together, and *then say* “Follow me.” Jesus just simply said “Follow me.” And they did.

And their humanity certainly didn’t disappear or even dissipate while in

the presence of Jesus...their shocked reaction to Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman is just one example of their very limited, albeit human, perspective. The disciples, along with the rest of society, put limits on who they could talk with and associate with and who was worthy of Jesus’ time and attention, not to mention their own. Which is ironic, considering their own not-so-perfect pasts.

All of us put limits on ourselves. And we use those limits as excuses. Excuses that limit *how God can use us* and *where God can take us*. We “tarry”...not going fully where God is calling us...because we think something has “to change” or because we think we have to “be better” or “get better” before we can fully become who God is calling us to be.

What we think has “to change” might be societal, or it might be personal. Usually it is both. It was with the Unnamed Woman at the Well.

First, there were the limits that society put on the woman at the well:

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<sup>1</sup> Text: Joseph Hart, 1759; refrain, anonymous.  
Music: Southern Harmony, 1835. RESTORATION.  
Public Domain.

- a) she was a **Samaritan** - one who was an outsider and even an enemy in the eyes of a Jew
- b) she was a **woman** - a lower status for any ethnic or religious group
- c) she **wasn't married**, and she wasn't celibate either, in other words, she had a storied past...and present...

Then there were the limits the Woman at the Well put on herself:

- a) because of what society said about Samaritans and Jews, she didn't think it possible for her to be talking to, let alone getting a drink for, a **Jew**, especially a Jewish rabbi
- b) because she was a woman, she didn't think it right to be talking with this **man** in the clear light of day
- c) because she was **ostracized for her unconventional relationships with men**, she thought the only time she could go to the well was at noon, the hottest time of day, instead of at dusk with the rest of the women

Do you see how these limits are related? How what society says is "right and proper" affects the way an individual thinks and acts and feels? How man-made limits can re-write the story of our lives? How what we're told and how what we've experienced in the past keeps us from living in the truth of our God-created

identity...keeps us from living as an equally beloved child of God...keeps us from accepting the grace that Jesus so freely gives?

In this encounter between Jesus and this woman, the well becomes the place of "living water," because it is there that this woman got her life back. She came to the well distinctly as a *Samaritan* and as a *woman* and shamefully, perhaps, *as one without a husband*. She came to the well with labels that defined who she could talk to, when she could do her housework, and what she thought about herself.

When she left the well, she left as a child of God. Sure, she was still a Samaritan, still a woman, and still not married...but we get the sense that she no longer felt defined or limited by the definitions of those labels by society. How do we know?

Well, she wasn't afraid to tell her entire village that she had been talking to a Jewish man, and she ran up to these people in the clear light of day...the very people she sought to avoid by going to draw water at noon by herself.

And, perhaps most importantly, she stopped focusing on who she was or wasn't and on what she could do or couldn't do --- and started focusing on this man who was revealing to her that he *knew* her, everything about her. The woman at the well was finally seen - as *herself* - without

judgment - and thus began to see that Jesus might just be the Messiah.

It must have been just as transformational a moment for Jesus as it was for the woman. Frustrated by his disciples' lack of understanding, finally here was a woman *who named who Jesus knew himself to be*: the Messiah. And the woman didn't call him a Messiah because he said he was a great military leader or magician...she called him Messiah because he proved that he knew her inside and out and, despite her flaws, he still wanted to be in her presence...still wanted to share a drink of water with her...still wanted to reveal the truth of God's Spirit to her.

A story that began with a woman who had a limited view of herself and her society, ended with a woman whose worldview and heart had expanded...a woman who had pushed past her limits of understanding who she could be.

Sister Corita Kent - artist, teacher, social activist, and peace maker - Sister Corita Kent said, "*Love the moment and the energy of that moment will spread beyond all boundaries.*" Jesus loved the Woman at the Well in *that* moment...and the energy of that moment propelled her back to her village to share about who she met...and as a consequence...the truth spread...in the most unlikely of places - a Samaritan village - and

these *Samaritans* named Jesus as the Savior of the World. "*Love the moment and the energy of that moment will spread beyond all boundaries.*"

Breaking boundaries and pushing past limits...becoming what God is calling us to be...becoming what God has already created us to be...transforming the world into the Kingdom of Heaven here on Earth...**Could it be that *this is what it means to be a follower of Jesus?***

Our headlining news this weekend included three women, who like the Samaritan woman had limits placed on them by society, but each broke through the limits set upon her to effect change in our world:

First **Geraldine Ferraro**. She died yesterday at age 75 from multiple myeloma. Ferraro put a substantial crack in the glass ceiling of White House elections in 1984 when she became the first female vice presidential candidate from a major U.S. political party by running with Democratic presidential candidate Walter Mondale.

As a woman in this male-dominated arena, she endured a harsh White House campaign (with personal criticism and political attacks) and even though her ticket lost, she is remembered for her high

achievements as a courageous and inspirational figure -- who wasn't afraid to speak her mind.

Her rise in politics was an American rags-to-riches story. The daughter of Italian immigrant parents, she grew up in the South Bronx of New York City, worked her way through law school, became a prosecutor, ran for Congress and won, and then ran for Vice President. She, herself, said she never lost sight of the “hope of the future.”

President Obama described her as:

a trailblazer who broke down barriers for women, and Americans of all backgrounds and walks of life. Whether it was as a public school teacher, assistant district attorney, member of Congress or candidate for vice president, Geraldine fought to uphold America's founding ideals of equality, justice, and opportunity for all...And as our ambassador to the U.N. Human Rights Commission, she stood up for those same ideals around the world.<sup>2</sup>

You know, before “equality, justice, and opportunity for all” were founding ideals of *this* country...they were *first* the mission of Jesus Christ...the very embodiment of his life and the very world he called us to create...an equal and just place for all. We still have limits to push past...Geraldine Ferraro helped with

one of those limits. She didn't let history dictate who ran for presidential offices. She helped create a future with less limitations for women.

And then secondly, we've heard a lot about **Elizabeth Taylor** who also died this week. The legendary actress famed for her beauty, her jet-set lifestyle, her charitable endeavors and her many marriages.

The obituaries keep calling her “the last movie star” — meaning she was the last star from that era when movies were the center of American culture. She became the first million-dollar actress when she agreed to do *Cleopatra*. Taylor was ridiculed on and off throughout her life for her love affairs and her weight gain, but she didn't let those things define her. We may remember her as a beautiful and glamorous actress...but she did not let that image of beauty define her...not completely...she did not limit herself to that iconic role alone. She became an activist.

Taylor was one of the world's leaders in fighting AIDS, helping to raise money through her organization AmFAR and she was willing to talk about AIDS freely in public at a time before President Reagan — also from

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<sup>2</sup> CNN Wire Staff, “Trailblazer Geraldine Ferraro dies at age 75” (26 March 2011), accessed at <http://www.cnn.com/2011/POLITICS/03/26/obit.geraldine.ferraro/index.html?hpt=T2> on 26 March 2011.

Hollywood — would even say the word.<sup>3</sup>

For years, AIDS was thought of as a disease limited to certain individuals. It was full of stigma and pain heaped on top of an already devastating disease. What Taylor did was give a voice of compassion and education about AIDS with her campaign, “*We ALL have AIDS (if one of us does).*”

Taylor pushed past her own limits as an iconic actress to broaden her impact as an activist. Even more, she pushed a societal boundary, that at the time, was taboo. She brought the rest of us into the very place we wanted to be boundaried from...she reminded us that people who had AIDS, were just that - People. Worthy of inclusion, not exclusion.

And then yesterday, we saw the most disturbing footage of **Eman al-Obeidy**, otherwise known as the “screaming woman in Libya.”

Obeidy burst into the hotel in Tripoli where international journalists were having breakfast...she was frantic to let the world know she had been tortured by Moammar Gadhafi's militia. Speaking in detail and showing them physical proof on her

body, she was persistent and determined – and insanely brave. I’ll let you watch the video coverage if you want more details.

Government officials quickly closed in to stifle her. But she persisted, wanting the journalists (and therefore, the world) to see Gadhafi's brutality firsthand. This was the *first time* a Libyan opposed to Gadhafi attempted to independently approach any journalists.

Security men said Obeidy was "mentally ill" and was being taken to a "hospital," as they forced her into a car. But journalists who were there saw something different: “*A woman who dared to speak against the regime was quickly silenced. Journalists who dared to tell her story paid a price.*”<sup>4</sup>

Eman al-Obeidy is not accepting the limits Gadhafi’s regime is putting on her and the rest of her country. Talk about breaking a limit and a boundary. This woman didn’t care who the government told her she was or what the government told her she could or couldn’t do...she knew she was someone of value and worth...and she was determined to let others know

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<sup>3</sup> John Powers, “Elizabeth Taylor’s Legacy: AIDS Activist, Movie Star” (25 March 2011), accessed at <http://www.npr.org/2011/03/25/134829949/elizabeth-taylors-legacy-aids-activist-movie-star> on 26 March 2011.

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<sup>4</sup> The CNN Wire Staff, “Libyan woman bursts into hotel to tell her story of rape,” (26 March 2011), accessed at <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/03/26/libya.beaten.woman/index.html?hpt=T2> on 26 March 2011.

too. She knows that true freedom cannot be this limiting.

This is the same lesson the Woman at the Well learns. Jesus meets her at the well and they talk. She felt like a failure because of what others told her she was. Jesus listens to her story and tells her some of his. But when she goes back into her village, what she says to folks is puzzling. She says, “*Come see a man who told me everything I’ve ever done,*” as if that were somehow a comforting statement! I’ve often thought perhaps the gospel writers left out part of her invitation. I want it to read, “*Come see a man who told me everything I’ve ever done and still loves me!*”<sup>5</sup>

God loves you as you are and is calling you *to serve in great ways* and *to do great things* and *to be great* in ways you can’t even imagine. Is something holding you back? What is the world telling you about yourself that you’re believing and shouldn’t be? How are you limiting yourself and thus limiting God’s dreams for your life?

In his book *Between the Dreaming and the Coming True*, author Robert

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<sup>5</sup> Excerpted from Milton Brasher-Cunningham’s March 25, 2011 Lenten blog post, *Part of the Story*, on [http://donteatalone.blogspot.com/2011/03/lenen-journal-part-of-story.html?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+blogspot%2FFGfQ+%28don%27t+eat+alone%29](http://donteatalone.blogspot.com/2011/03/lenen-journal-part-of-story.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+blogspot%2FFGfQ+%28don%27t+eat+alone%29), accessed on 26 March 2011.

Benson writes about finding a road home to God. This excerpt illustrates how part of that process is lifting off the limits that we put on ourselves, the half-truths that we live with:

It is terrifyingly easy to find oneself doing one’s work without any real sense of the meaning of it. I have spent a lot of time involved in a workshop that helps people come to see the spiritual gifts that are at work in them and in their lives. One young woman that I remember - a young woman whose shyness was painful to see, whose sense of her own self was so low that she could hardly look you in the eye - told a group of us that she was sure God had not given her any gifts that could be used for ministry to others. “I’m just a night nurse in a children’s hospital,” she said, almost embarrassed. What would it have taken I wondered - a clerical collar or a seat on the board, a medical degree or a bigger salary, a house on a hill or a big shiny car - to help her see that she was gifted in a way that [involves] more ministry in an evening than many of us do in a lifetime?<sup>6</sup>

What a witness...and she didn’t even know it. The Samaritan Woman had a powerful witness too: “*Come see a man who knew all about the things I did, who knows me inside and out. Do you think this could be the Messiah?*”

Her witness was borne of her new understanding of herself - as one with fewer labels and limits.

What is your witness to the world?

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Benson, *Between the Dreaming and the Coming True: The Road Home to God* (Penguin Putnam Inc., New York), 1996, pg 89.

If you don't know...then it's time to stop "tarrying" ...time to stop making excuses. You are incredibly gifted. And the world needs your gift...your vision...your act that is going to push some limit in our world that desperately needs to be broken.

Take a risk (*it's not really too big a risk!*) - walk into the loving and daring grace of Jesus. It's a way of life without labels or liabilities...it's a way of life that is Love Itself. Love Incarnate. Love without Limits.

Amen.

## Gospel Proclamation - John 4:5-30, 39-42 (*The Message*)

Calvary Baptist Church of Denver - 27 March 2011

**Narrator** - Kevin Padworski

**Jesus** - Brian Henderson

**Samaritan Woman** - Anne Jernberg

**Villagers** - Brenda Goodman, Joe Greemore, Todd Clough, Austina Lee

**8:15am Set** - Narrator at lectern mic. Well located on organ side of chancel. The well is represented by a jug water fountain on a table. A stool is set up for Jesus. Jesus enters from back of chapel, walking down center aisle to well. Samaritan woman enters from Voyagers classroom. Villagers sitting on piano side, first pew.

**10:55am Set** - Narrator at lectern mic. Well located in the enclave where the light switches are. A stool is set for Jesus. A jug water fountain is set up to represent the well. Jesus enters from organ side floor door, walks up and across chancel steps to the well. Samaritan Woman enters from floor door on organ side. Villagers sitting in choir loft, baptistry side.

*(Jesus & Samaritan Woman off stage.)*

**Narrator:** A reading from the Gospel of John.

When Jesus was leaving the Judean countryside headed to Galilee, he passed through Samaria. In those days, Jews and Samaritans did not talk to one another.

*(Jesus enters, walking toward the well)*

He came to Sychar, a Samaritan village that bordered the field Jacob had given his son Joseph. Jacob's well was still there. Jesus, worn out by the trip, sat down at the well. It was noon. He was alone because his disciples had gone to the village for lunch.

*(Jesus sits on stool by well. )*

A woman, a Samaritan, came to draw water.

*(Samaritan Woman enters with bucket, walks to well. Narrator stays at mic, but turns to watch the scene.)*

**Jesus:** Would you give me a drink of water?

**Samaritan Woman:** *(taken aback)* How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?

**Jesus:** If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking *me* for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water.

**Samaritan Woman:** Sir, you don't even have a bucket to draw with, and this well is deep. So, how are you going to get this 'living water'? Are you a better man than our ancestor Jacob, who dug this well and drank from it, he and his sons and livestock, and passed it down to us?

**Jesus:** (*pointing at water in well*) Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst - not ever. The water I give will be an everlasting spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.

**Samaritan Woman:** Sir, give me this water so I won't ever get thirsty, and won't ever have to come back to this well again!

**Jesus:** Go call your husband and then come back.

**Samaritan Woman:** I have no husband.

**Jesus:** That's nicely put: 'I have no husband.' You've had five husbands, and the man you're living with now isn't even your husband. You certainly spoke the truth there.

**Samaritan Woman:** Oh, so you're a prophet! Well, tell me this: Our ancestors worshiped God at this mountain (*pointing up to baptistry*), but you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place for worship, right?

**Jesus:** Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you Samaritans will worship the Father neither here at this mountain nor there in Jerusalem. You worship guessing in the dark; we Jews worship in the clear light of day. God's way of salvation is made available through the Jews. But the time is coming - it has, in fact, come - when what you're called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter. It's who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That's the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly *themselves* before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself - God is Spirit. Those who worship God must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.

**Samaritan Woman:** I don't know about that. I do know that the Messiah is coming. When he arrives, we'll get the whole story.

**Jesus:** I am he. You don't have to wait any longer or look any further.

**Narrator:** Just then Jesus' disciples came back. They were shocked. They couldn't believe he was talking with that kind of a woman. No one said what they were all thinking, but their faces showed it.

The woman took the hint and left. In her confusion she left her water bucket.

*(Samaritan Woman leaves headed to village. (Woman walks up to pews (8:15 service) / choir loft (10:55 service) to talk to the "village.")*

**Samaritan Woman:** Come, see a man who knew all about the things I did, who knows me inside and out. Do you think this could be the Messiah?

*(Villagers get up and walk toward the well.)*

**Narrator:** So the villagers went out to see for themselves. Many of the Samaritans from that village committed themselves to him because of the woman's witness:

**Samaritan Woman:** He knew about all the things I did. He knows me inside and out!

**Narrator:** The villagers asked Jesus to stay on, so Jesus stayed two days. A lot more people entrusted their lives to him when they heard what he had to say. They said to the woman:

**Villagers:** *(in unison)* "We're no longer taking this on your say-so. We've heard it for ourselves and know it for sure. This guy's the Savior of the world!"

**Narrator:** This is the Word of God for the People of God. Thanks be to God.