

The Wom(e)n at the Well

In Saint John's gospel, we find Jesus interacting with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. The woman approaches to draw water, and the Lord asks her for a drink. She is a Samaritan, and she knows that Jews and Samaritans do not share anything in common. By the end of their meeting, Jesus offers eternal life and salvation to her, and to her Samaritan brothers and sisters as well. They become his brothers and sisters, and thus ours.

6 I have prayed with this passage many times. Submitting it to Ignatian contemplation, I too have been provided "living water" — drops of courage, drops of indifference and drops of desire to love and to be loved. These are the graces that have flowed into me. These are the graces for which I have thirsted.

Why and how are these the graces for which I have thirsted? Before answering this question, some context is necessary. First, I have always been "conservative." I hold conservative views on politics and ecclesiology, and this seems to be the case with theology and liturgy as well. My 'comfort zone' has been wide around 'tradition,' and narrow around what is 'progressive.' Therefore, serving as chaplain to the Knights of Columbus (as I did during my first year in Saint Louis) was well within my comfort zone. Second, I have always struggled with languages; the idea of learning a new language has unnerved me for most of my life.

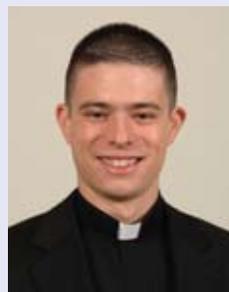
Last spring, during meditation, I went out to meet Jesus at the well and to ask him what I ought to do for the summer. The Lord was reclining on the grass next to the well, and he looked up at me, smiled, and said, "Tom, I think that you ought to study Spanish. Watch me. Pay attention to what I will do." At that moment, the Samaritan woman approached, and Jesus asked her for a drink. Jesus turned around and said to me, "You, too, ought to go out to Samaritan women at wells. What I have done — and what I call you to do — we will do together."

The Lord's message was clear: I need not be afraid of unfamiliar circumstances or meeting strangers. I need not be afraid of learning Spanish. He gave me the courage to go to Spain and study, the indifference to accept the difficulties that I would encounter, and the desire to love and be loved by those Spanish-speaking brothers and sisters of ours on whose behalf I still struggle to learn Spanish.

When I returned from Spain, I wanted to continue going out to wells in unfamiliar lands populated by unfamiliar people. Therefore, I asked for permission to spend my apostolic hours each week at the Catholic Worker House. I would leave my comfort zone. I would go out to a new well with the Lord once again.

I have always been drawn to our work in education; the mission of the Catholic Worker House is very different. I respect and admire our civil government and our elected leaders; some of the Catholic Workers hope for some form of anarchy, Christian or otherwise. I love high liturgy; the Catholic Workers host informal Masses. Yet, the courage, indifference and desires that prompted me to follow the Lord out to this well that is the Catholic Worker House to actually meet the women — the young, single, impoverished mothers who are so well served there — is the same courage, indifference and love that prompts me to continue serving there.

These Samaritan-like women have found a way into my heart, and I am finding a way into theirs. By remaining at the well with the Lord and with them, I continue to drink of the "living water" that flows out of and toward the very heart of God Himself.



Tom Olson, SJ, is a Jesuit scholastic in his second year of philosophy studies at St. Louis University in Saint Louis, Mo.