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**Providence Presbyterian Church**  
**Third Sunday in Lent**  
**March 8, 2026**  
**Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42**

**"The Well of Grace"**

Since I'm continuing my sermon series on Amazing Grace, I thought I'd mess with your minds a little. We all love Amazing Grace for profound theological reasons, but did you know Amazing Grace is also very versatile? For instance, it can be sung to lots of different tunes: Sing Amazing Grace to Gilligan's Island; Sing Amazing Grace to House of the Rising Sun. There are other tunes that also work – Light My Fire and Stairway to Heaven. You're welcome for getting one of those tunes stuck in your head!

Like tunes, there are some biblical stories that get stuck in our heads. The encounter of Jesus with the woman at the well in Samaria is one of those episodes that can get stuck in our minds and play on a continuous loop as we ponder its meaning. Some thirty miles into the Samaritan territory on foot, Jesus stopped at noon to rest by a well. Jesus was in hostile territory.

In the blistering heat of the midday sun, Jesus met a woman who had come to draw water. Now, normally, the most strenuous household tasks, like drawing and carrying water, were performed first thing in the morning or just before sunset when it was cooler. But this woman had come in the hottest part of the day, probably because, she had a bad reputation. Rather than endure the insults and taunts of the other women who gathered for gossip at the well in the morning, she preferred to go when no one else would be there. This woman was an outcast even among the outcasts.

Jesus could hardly have chosen a more disreputable woman with whom to converse. For the Samaritan woman, it all began with a simple request from Jesus, "Give me a drink." Isn't it amazing how many life-changing events begin so simply? "Would you like to come to church with me?" "Do you mind if I sit with you?" "Doctor, I've got this lump."

The Samaritan woman was probably startled by Jesus' initiative because no one ever talked to her, let alone a man who was a Jew. Perhaps she had begun to believe that she was just what everyone said she was - an immoral woman not worth giving the time of day. If the only messages a person gets about themselves are negative ones, they will eventually adopt a negative self-image. This is true whether the negative message sender is family,

society or even religion. In the Samaritan woman's case, it was probably all three that told her that she was worthless, and she believed it.

But Jesus saw something different within her. He saw the essential value of her soul and spoke to her as a person of ultimate worth. The world has always been quick to "pigeon-hole" people into certain categories, based upon the norms of society.

The world would be a much poorer place if everyone accepted the world's judgement about themselves as true. Einstein was four years old before he could speak and seven before he could read. Emily Dickinson deemed herself a failure because only 18 of her poems were published in her lifetime. But more than 1800 were published after her death. Beethoven's music teacher said, "As a composer, he is hopeless." Thomas Edison's teacher told him he was too stupid to learn anything. Margaret Thatcher was the first female Prime Minister of England, serving for 11 years. Winston Churchill failed sixth grade. Oprah Winfrey was born into abject poverty, gave birth at age 14 and yet has become a household name and a multi-billionaire. And Walt Disney was fired by a newspaper editor who said, "he had no good ideas."

You can bet that something happened in the lives of these people that made them come alive; something that set them on fire; something that awakened their thirst. That is what Jesus did for the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus took her seriously and addressed her at the point of her need for affirmation.

As a woman in that society, she was no more than chattel. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees were actually arguing about whether a woman even had a soul. As a woman of questionable character, not only was she disregarded, she was also ignored as totally insignificant. But Jesus didn't shun her or treat her as if she were invisible. He engaged her in what appears to be playful banter filled with double meaning, using the symbolic phrase, "living water."

"If you knew the gift of God," said Jesus, "and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." Jesus has this way of using the basics of life to catch people's attention and then drawing their focus heavenward. He did it with bread, wine, coins, fish, seeds, soil, and now here with water.

He used elements with which all people were familiar to redirect their attention on spiritual values which were unfamiliar. Especially in such an arid land, water is a necessity. Even though water is used for many things, its most essential use is to satisfy thirst. In the first century, Rabbis commonly referred to the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, as the "living water." Thus, Jesus symbolically took for himself the title reserved for the teaching and law of Moses.

Next, the conversation moved to another level as Jesus told her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." She may not have fully realized it, but that was her commission to spread the gospel - a commission which she soon fulfilled. "I have no husband," she said, thinking this would let her off the hook. But then the dialogue took a dramatic turn as Jesus reminded the woman that she had had a series of five husbands and was currently living with a man who was not her husband.

We can only imagine her standing there with her mouth agape and her eyes bulging, as she stuttered and stammered a response and tried to change the subject. What she was about to discover was that because God accepts us as we are, there is no need to try hide anything from God.

Jesus freed her from the fetters of tradition which prevented her from being all that she was intended to be. She did not have to be a failure because of five failed marriages. She did not have to be alienated because she was a woman. She did not have to be an outcast because she was a Samaritan. She could be an accepted part of a community of believers simply by taking the living water into the vessel of her life. She would no longer be shut out, shut down, or shut up. Such was the affirming power of the gospel of love.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing of all is that once the woman was assured of her place in God's sight, she threw caution to the wind and proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ in the very village that had rejected her. She was perhaps the very first evangelist – a spreader of good news. And do you know what? The villagers who had once looked down their noses at this woman, now looked upon her with a new respect.

When they heard her amazing testimony, they didn't question her judgement, they didn't scoff or ridicule her, they didn't disregard her. John says, "Many Samaritans from that city believed in (Jesus) because of the woman's testimony." The woman at the well was not looking for anything but water. She didn't know about living water until Jesus came to her.

That's what is so hopeful about this story. This story is about a woman minding her own business, trudging along to get water at the well in the noontime heat, who is met by Jesus. He comes to her. She didn't ask for him. She wasn't looking for him. Jesus spoke to her of things she could not have known before she met him. He told her of a treasure she didn't even know she was looking for.

That's how Jesus often comes to us. He comes to us and speaks to us of a need deeper than what we thought was our deepest need. He seeks us out before we ever go to the trouble of looking for him. Our relationship with Him is dependent upon his initiative, not ours.

That's hopeful because I do not always know what I need. Most of the time, when I am in trouble, I am the last one to know I am in trouble. There have been plenty of times when I ought to have been looking for something but didn't have the sense to know it.

The really good news of this encounter with the woman at the well is that He comes to us. He initiates the conversation. He comes to us so that we might come to him. That is the embodiment of grace – giving us what we don't even know we need.

Grace, mercy and justice get a bit confused in our minds. So, here are some definitions that can help us: Justice is getting what we deserve; mercy is getting what we don't deserve; grace is getting more than we deserve.

The well from which Jesus draws grace is bottomless and open to all. Thanks be to God for the well of amazing grace in which we are refreshed even when we don't deserve it. In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being where you are. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen**