

John's Gospel is unique. It is the only gospel to be written not as a history of the life of Jesus, but as a book about the truth of who Jesus was—a book of theology. Ever since it was written—around 120 AD-- it has been used as the written curriculum used to train new followers of Jesus.

The gospel of John is filled with many great stories—but it is important to remember when reading this book that the author of the Gospel of John himself says this book is a book of signs and symbols—not to be read literally. If it is read literally, it is enjoyable, you will get a lot out of it—but you will miss John's dedication to showing us not just what this Jesus of Nazareth did, but who he was.

We deal with such signs and symbols everyday.

Lights begin to be strung up all over town so we know it signals that Christmas is coming. Of course, here in Maine, they are up way WAY past Christmas... No sure what that means.

We are driving down a road and we see balloons on a mailbox—we know that represents someone's...birthday.

We are in a restaurant and we see a couple, and suddenly one hands the other a small black velvet box. Proposal!

These are symbols we all see and instantly understand.

The story today begins with a huge – red flag waving symbol to Jewish people everywhere: Jesus meets a woman at a well.

If you were a Jew of Jesus' day, you would smile.

Here's why: it would instantly bring to mind at least three stories from the Old Testament. Since we're not as familiar with the Old Testament stories as those Jews were—we miss the reference.

So settle in: I'll tell you a story.

The first story is from the book of Genesis: Abraham has a son named Isaac. Abraham wants him to find a wife—but not from the small group of people in their community—so he sends Isaac to his old hometown. There Isaac finds the community well and waits. Women of that time were the ones to gather water at the wells for their families. He asks each young woman who comes to give him a drink. If one does, he might offer to water her livestock. This is a time honored tradition of courtship. If the woman gives the water, the answer is yes.

We all know the ending—Rebekah says yes through this ritual, and eventually marries Isaac.

Just five chapters later, Jacob—son of Rebekah and Isaac-- goes in search of a wife for himself. Isaac sends him to look among Isaacs own kin, in his old hometown, and Jacob goes. He stops at a well, and finally sees a young woman watering her flocks and he asks her for a drink. The rest.. as they say...

The third example concerns Moses. Now we all remember Moses: the man who challenges Pharaoh, parts the Red Sea? Well, before that happened, he was forced to flee Egypt, running for his life, when he found a well and sat down by it. I think we all know what's coming...Seven daughters of a priest in Midian come to water their sheep-- when they are suddenly attacked. Moses comes to their aid, drives off the bad men, and proceeds to water the daughter's flock. He asks one for a drink: Zipporah, who becomes his wife.

So are we seeing the symbolism of the wells and water? The story tries to even give a hint to us—it is Jacob's well. For good Jews of Jesus' day this scenario screams dinner and a tiny black velvet box.

So is Jesus looking for a wife?

That's not far wrong. In John's time Christ is known as the Bridegroom, and a bridegroom seeks a Bride. Who is the bride of Christ in our theology? The Church. The followers of Christ.

The symbolic Samaritan woman immediately sees the well, coupled with the cup of water ritual as the initiation of courtship, and she cuts right to the chase: Samaritans and Jews do not even like each other. There is deep hatred on both sides. The Jews feel like they are the loyal remnant from their years of exile. The Samaritans, however, stayed in their homeland, but eventually intermarried—over and over-- with the foreigners sent to re-populate the country by their conquerors. She knows this.

But Jesus asks one of these hated people for a drink. This – to the author of the Gospel of John--symbolically invites the woman and her townfolk—and the Samaritans-- to become joined with him as a faithful part of his new movement. From this moment on, Jesus' conversation with the woman, and then the town becomes a deep theological conversation about human boundaries. He is courting them, if you'd like, into a new relationship.

But Jesus is offering this woman—and her people--*of a hated clan*-- the opportunity to drink of this living water that binds all of humanity together.

That's the message of this story. Jesus offers living water to women—equally to men. Jesus offers living water to the people considered abhorrent, unclean—people who have broken any number of rules of Hebraic culture. He even offers it to the 12 who watch—the followers of Jesus--- who clearly don't always understand that what Jesus offers—this living water-- is for EVERYONE.

Christ wants us to drink deeply of the water so that we will never again know the thirst that comes with being outcast. There are no insiders and outsiders. Or as Rev Mark Sandin says: *"After close study, I have concluded that Jesus believed there are two kinds of people: your neighbors, who you are supposed to love, and your enemies, who you are supposed to love."*

Amen.