

## THE ABANDONED JAR

John 4:5-42

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The jar,  
clay once baked in the sun...  
or had they by then developed such a thing as a kiln (?)....

No matter.

The jar,  
how ever it might once have been baked,  
was abandoned to bake once more...  
abandoned by the well  
to bake in noontday heat.<sup>1</sup>

Wonder why John told us she abandoned the jar?  
One thing we know of John.  
As a storyteller,  
he included few

if *any*

incidental details.  
Every syllable...  
Every tone...  
Every shift...  
Every particular...loaded with meaning.

It's true, of course,  
as Bible stories go,  
some of John's are quite long;  
but even in his longest stories,  
every detail has rich meaning.

Some people when they tell a story  
go around their elbow to get to their nose.  
I do that sometimes.  
Perhaps you've noticed.

If, for example,  
I want to tell you the story of how my Cousin Welly Simpson  
got his unusual name,  
all I have to tell you  
is that when he was a child  
he fell in the well.

That's not my style.

I'm more apt to tell you at least a few unnecessary details  
about my Cousin Welly Simpson...  
maybe even tell you some things I don't know for sure  
if by telling them it will make a better story  
so long, of course, that I don't change the basic truth of the story.:  
Scandalized the family by marrying a Yankee...  
First in the county to buy a Model A Ford...  
Had a one-eared dog named Bob.

None of it has anything to do with how he got his name  
but it's the way of some storytellers...  
especially, I think,  
some southern storytellers.

That's not the way of John.  
For John,  
every detail is packed...  
no particular is wasted.

If I told stories in the style of John,  
the story of Cousin Welly and how he got his name  
would go like this:

*My Cousin Welly Simpson got his name  
because when he was a child  
he fell in the well (period).*

The message is,  
in the style of John,  
Cousin Welly Simpson was a klutz.

If I were recognized as one who tells stories  
in the style of John  
and added one small detail,  
the meaning of the story might change.  
Listen to this:

*My cousin Welly Simpson got his name  
because one day,  
while he was helping his little sister find her lost kitten,  
when he looked in the well,  
he leaned over too far  
and fell in.*

In some ways the message is the same.  
Cousin Welly Simpson was a klutz.

But in an important way the message is different.  
Cousin Welly was a compassionate and lovable klutz.

Thus it is,  
true to his style,  
in the story of the Woman at the Well,  
John included what an unsuspecting reader might think  
is this unnecessary and pointless detail.  
He said the woman abandoned her jar at the well...  
just ran off and left it there:

She left it,  
like a half-empty pack of Winstons or Marlboros  
abandoned by a smoker determined to quit  
and to begin tasting food again  
and breathing fresh air;

She left the jar,  
as if it were a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels  
abandoned by an alcoholic determined,  
with the help of a higher power,  
to control his addiction  
or to control her addiction  
and live as a free person;

She abandoned the jar  
as if it were an all-consuming job  
rejected by a workaholic  
who set off to make less money  
and spend more time with his children;

She left the jar  
as if it were a painful perversion  
abandoned by one accustomed to using others  
who set off for a life of kindness and giving.

She just went off and left the jar  
as if it were an old, old tribal prejudice  
abandoned by one taught from childhood to hate  
who set off on a journey to embrace new  
and unexpected friendships.

You remember the story of the Woman at the Well.

I'm sure of it.

Of the gospel writers,

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John,

John is the only one to tell this story.

Each of the gospels has its own point of emphasis:

Matthew, the most Jewish of the lot,

portrayed Jesus as the master teacher.

Mark, the first to write it all down,  
presented disciples as not very bright.  
Luke made much ado  
of having Jesus and disciples on a journey to destiny  
and that destiny was the formation of the church.  
John, so unlike all the others,  
uses lots and lots of irony  
and little, if any, wasted detail  
all in a relentless effort  
to spell out this one point:

that this man Jesus is the Son of God;  
and, as such,  
is worthy of all the glory due to God.

True to his form,  
with great irony and economy  
John tells the story:

On his way from Judea back to his home turf in Galilee,  
Jesus and his disciples  
*had* to go through Samaria.  
John emphasized the *had*.  
Of course they *had* to go through Samaria.  
It was a geographical necessity.  
It's like  
if you are going from Rock Hill to Charleston  
you *have* to go through Columbia...or around Columbia on the I.  
You don't *have* to go through or around Columbia  
but it's the only thing that makes sense.  
In the economy and irony of John's storytelling,  
however,  
going from Judea to Galilee by way of Samaria  
was also a *theological* necessity.<sup>2</sup>  
The necessity of going through Samaria  
is one way to explain,  
for example,  
how it is you and I happen to be at worship  
in church this morning  
and we were not at worship in the synagogue yesterday  
if, indeed,  
we would otherwise  
have wound up at worship at all.

Jesus and disciples *had* to go through Samaria  
for a still more important reason.

Samaria was a place of festering mutual prejudice  
born of ancient wounds and hatred...  
wounds and hatred as real as the wounds and hatred  
that yet fester in that part of the world.

The sands of Israel and Lebanon  
are soaked with the blood of the innocent  
because of that very kind of hate.

In the irony and economy of John,  
Jesus and disciples had no choice  
but to go to the place  
of ancient and festering wounds and hatred  
to bring truth and healing.

They say 40% of the population of Lebanon is Christian.  
We hear they are feeding and housing thousands of refugees  
in their churches and schools.  
We also hear they have neither sympathy for Hezbollah  
nor sympathy for Israel.  
Who knows?  
Maybe they have to be there just now,  
not so much to convert  
as to demonstrate a peaceful alternative.  
Such demonstrations is, at least,  
worthy of our most earnest prayer.

Whether that is true today or not time will tell,  
but so it was once,  
in the region of Samaria,  
in a certain city by the name of Sychar,  
Jesus had to be there  
and while he was there he waited at the well  
for someone to come and draw him a drink.

If we were John's first readers,  
we would,  
without a doubt,  
recognize this as irony born of an ancient  
and well-known  
romantic literary setting:

Abraham's servant found a bride for Isaac at a well;  
Jacob met Rachael at a well;  
Moses met Zipporah at a well.<sup>3</sup>

This is a setting, pure and simple,  
for an ancient-world romance to be born:  
Stranger, a man, comes to well;  
Man has no jar;

Woman of pure virtue comes to draw water;  
Woman draws water for man;  
Man is swept off his feet;  
Woman flees to tell family;  
Woman returns to marry man.

That's the way of ancient romance  
only in John's irony and economy of storytelling,  
the story is of love of a different sort  
and the woman is anything but pure...,  
or so she has been made to feel.

As the story progresses,  
Jesus and the woman have a long conversation.

It is the longest single conversation  
recorded between Jesus and anyone.<sup>4</sup>

Strange that such a long story  
would have no wasted details.

In the conversation  
Jesus pointed out,  
in the words of Barbara Brown Taylor,  
that the woman had had  
as many husbands as Elizabeth Taylor  
and the man with whom she was currently living  
was not her husband.

Maybe the analogy between Elizabeth Taylor  
and the woman at the well is accurate.

Barbara Brown Taylor is certainly a careful scholar  
and a brilliant and moving preacher.

She's quite remarkable;  
but maybe she got it wrong this time.

The traditional interpretation of the text could,  
of course,  
be right.

Maybe the woman did play fast and loose with marriage vows;  
but I tend to think the more recent interpretations  
are more likely on target.

That is,  
the woman was likely trapped in a marriage system  
where a surviving brother was compelled to marry  
his brother's widow  
and, in this instance,  
the latest brother was unwilling to marry her.<sup>5</sup>

Whether the traditional or more recent interpretation  
is right cannot be determined;  
but the indisputable truth is,  
whether the woman caused her own pain

or her pain was the result of being a victim,  
she was in pain  
and Jesus brought healing.

For some it is lack of education;  
For others it is bad choices along the way  
that keep you down.

For some it is tired and senseless custom;  
For others it is choosing to do the wrong thing  
that keeps you under the gun.

For some it is accepted patterns of absurd practice;  
For others it is senseless self-determination  
that brings ache such as runs to the quick.  
For some it is being born in a place of ancient prejudice.  
For others it is hate born of raw greed  
that brings the world to the brink of disaster.

In any event,  
in the irony and economy of John's telling of the story,  
the woman came to the well to draw water of the usual kind...  
water of the kind for doing laundry,  
water of the kind for scrubbing floors and children,  
water of the kind for cooking,  
water of the kind for drinking;

but ironically...

ironically,  
she found there  
water of a living kind.

To use the images of John,  
the Word of God made flesh was standing before her;  
the way, the truth, and the life was there for her to see;  
life in abundance was there for her to touch....

It was like water to quench her deepest thirst.  
It was like water to cool the burning in her breast.  
It was like water to satisfy her most intense longing.  
It was like water to drown her most ancient hate.

In the irony and economy of John's telling of the story,  
John does not say specifically  
whether or not the woman believed.

The text says only,  
that she ran to tell others  
and that others believed.

John doesn't tell us she believed  
except for this detail...  
this seemingly incidental detail...  
this detail that makes no difference to plot of the story  
but means everything to the truth of the story...  
this detail that will not let us go.  
She abandoned the jar...  
just left it there to bake in the noonday heat.

It's an image  
John didn't want us to miss:

Like the Apostle Paul  
abandoning persecution of Christians  
to follow Christ;  
Like Augustine  
abandoning the high life  
to become a Christian scholar;  
Like Teresa of Avila  
abandoning a life of nobility  
to join the convent;  
Like John Calvin  
abandoning a life of law and philosophy  
to become a Christian theologian;  
Like John Bunyan  
abandoning a life of war and violence  
to write tales of Christian truth;  
Like Sojourner Truth  
abandoning a sect  
to set her people free with Christian truth;  
Like David Livingstone  
abandoning the slums of Scotland  
to take Christian truth to Africa;  
Like C. S. Lewis  
abandoning atheism  
to influence people in the reasonableness of Christ;  
Like Thomas Merton  
abandoning a life of extravagance  
for a life of shared devotion.<sup>6</sup>

For everyone who believes,  
there comes a moment

when the truth of Christ  
is all that matters.

All else is abandoned  
as that which, at best,  
is of secondary importance  
or of no importance at all.

For some the moment is just that:  
an instant that can be defined and told and retold  
when Jesus was recognized by you as the Word of God made flesh...  
when Jesus became for you the way, the truth, and the life...  
when Jesus became for you the source of the life of abundance,  
and from that moment forward  
nothing was ever the same again.  
The old securities were abandoned.

For others,  
and count me in this number,  
the moment of choice stretches over a lifetime  
to encompass no definable twinkling of the eye;

and yet the result is the same  
and this Jesus is for us the very Word of God,  
the way, the truth and the life  
the life of abundance...

and everything is shaped by that realization...  
all other securities are seen as transitory.

When that happens,  
the old jar  
is abandoned...  
abandoned to bake in the noonday sun.

The water it held,  
no matter how sweet and good,  
is not enough to sustain  
the fullness of this life of faith;

and it is not just half-empty packages of cigarettes  
or half-empty bottles of booze  
that have to be abandoned  
no matter that those are truly important to the addicted.

Old resentments must be abandoned  
if we are going to love as Christ loved;

Old dividing walls must be abandoned  
if we are going reach out as Christ reached out;

Old hatred and greed must be abandoned  
if the world is ever at last to know peace.

James S. Lowry  
Oakland Avenue Church  
August 6, 2006

### END NOTES

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1

. I am deeply indebted to Jon Walton for calling attention to this detail in his remarkable paper on the text presented to the 1999 meeting of the Movable Feast.

<sup>2</sup>. Walton.

<sup>3</sup>. Walton.

<sup>4</sup>. Walton.

<sup>5</sup>. Walton.

<sup>6</sup>. Each of these conversions, along with many others, is treated in detail by Hugh T. Kerr and John M. Mulder (eds) in their book, *Famous Conversions*, Eerdmans, 1994, as reprinted from *Conversions: The Christian Experience*, Eerdmans, 1983.