

Sermon: Give Me a Drink

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, March 8, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we follow along the journey of Jesus, through the season of Lent, we come to the story in John 4, of the Samaritan woman encountering Jesus, at Jacob's well in Sychar.

It is a story of an unnamed woman who slowly but steadily moves from misunderstanding to understanding, from unbelief to belief, from blindness to sight, from ignorance to knowledge, and from darkness to light.

The starting point of this unnamed Samaritan woman was that of shame—a woman of ill repute, with multiple failed marriages, without friends, shunned by others, and living in sin. The ending point of this story in John 4, is a fearless evangelist, first ever in that region, having the courage to tell others to “come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” (John 4:29)

On the basis of her testimony, many of the Samaritan villagers believe in Jesus and got to meet Jesus for themselves. It is a story of transformation, but also a story of irony.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines irony as “the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning”. Those who only view and understand the world literally do not fare so well with an ironical Jesus.

Case in point is the opening words from Jesus to the woman, “give me a drink”. It is an interesting ask. Jesus did not start from a position of authority but a position of vulnerability—give me a drink, for I am thirsty. It is high noon, and I have no means by which to draw water from the well. Give me a drink, please.

The irony is that by meeting this Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus meets someone who is in stark contrast to his previous encounter in chapter 3. When Jesus spoke with Nicodemus in John 3, he spoke with a respected male member of the Jewish religious establishment. Yet in John 4, he speaks with a female, foreign woman, with no name but ill repute.

By all definitions, it is a scandalous conversation, crossing all sorts well-defined, uncrossable boundaries, of gender, tradition, and cultural norms. It is scandalous, a fact noted by the Samaritan woman, as she responds to Jesus, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” The readers are then provided with a parenthetical commentary from the author: (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

To such objection raised by the woman, Jesus answered, “If you knew the gift of God 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.”

The irony of this initial exchange lies in her inability to recognize it is not Jesus who needs what only she can provide (that is water from Jacob’s well), but she who needs what only he can give (that is the living water).

Indeed, Jesus is not confused about why he initiates the encounter in the first place, he has the living water—the water that quenches thirst in the body, that sustains the weary spirit, that restores the soul as if a spring of water gushes up from the deep and flows towards eternal life. Jesus has the living water, he is the living water, hallelujah, praise be to God.

Ironies abound in the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. She tells the half truth that she has no husband, and Jesus reveals the full truth that she has had five and the man currently living with him is not her husband. She professes Jesus is a prophet for knowing the truth about her life, but does not realized that he is a different kind of prophet, who not only knows about the truth, but is the way the truth and the life. She believes in a coming Messiah, but does not realized the person standing in front of her, this Jew from Galilee, is indeed the one.

Only by leaving the well behind, and by inviting others to come and see, does she begin the journey to a larger reality beyond the initial irony, as she fearfully and wonderfully professes, not from a position of authority but of vulnerability, “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

I wonder what we as the church could learn from Jesus when we speak of the truth, as well as from this Samaritan woman, when she testifies to the truth. I wonder how a posture of vulnerability could enable our evangelical efforts to share the good news of Jesus with fellow travellers. Instead of seeing ourselves as the holders and defenders of the truth, might we humble ourselves and see that we are simply fellow beggars who happened to have found living bread and living water, and are eager to share with others.

I was initially thinking about sharing with you stories of missionaries who have devoted their lives to share the gospel in vulnerable ways—saints like Mother Teresa to India, or George Leslie Mackey to Taiwan. Then I realize St. Giles has its own saint, in the person of Dr. Pauline Brown. So allow me to share with you this Presbytery record of her life:

“After a long and rich life of 97 plus years, a faithful ministry as a missionary nurse, and surrounded by her loving family, co-workers and caregivers in Jobat, India, with whom she spent 72 years, Pauline Brown was peacefully laid to rest on April 1, 2023, the day of her passing.

As a young girl Pauline dreamed of working in India. Following wartime service in the navy from 1943 to 1946, she graduated from the Ottawa Civic Hospital in 1950 as a Registered Nurse earning a diploma in Public Health and a B.Sc. in nursing; she also earned a Master of Health Care Practice from McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario.

While serving as a nurse in the navy in the 1950s, Pauline met a former missionary to India, which intensified her sense of calling to work overseas.

The Women’s Missionary Society (W.M.S.) appointed 25-year-old Pauline to a four-month posting in India. The four months became 55 years, working alongside the Bhil Tribal people under what is now called the Church of North India.

She served as Director of Jobat Christian Hospital and as a teacher at the Graduate School for Nurses in Indore, and as a board member of Christian Medical College Ludhiana and Vellore and life member of Trained Nurses Association of India (TNAI) and (CMAI). She lived her faith in her nursing and in nursing education.

Pauline lived by grace. She understood that God's graciousness filled her every waking moment.

She was a natural preacher who lived out her faith in word and deed, never missing an opportunity to proclaim God's grace.

Pauline cannot be described with mere words.

She was a force of nature – always a blessing, always encouraging, always participating in the transformative activity of God.

To receive her blessing was to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that you were loved.

Pauline retired in Jobat and chose to live there after retirement.

She was a beloved and respected elder and wise community leader. In 2001 she received the Order of Canada for her dedicated service. Knox College recognized her ministry with the degree Doctor of Divinity (honoris causa).

Both a funeral and a memorial service were held in Jobat India at Zion Church, Church of North India.

A memorial service was held at St. Giles Church, Ottawa, Ontario on June 10, 2023, conducted by the minister, Paul Wu, with remembrances shared by M. Wilma Welsh, clerk of session, Knox Church, Guelph and moderator of the 132nd General Assembly, Andrew J. R. Johnson, retired minister in the Presbytery of Ottawa, and Stan Currie, elder of St. Giles Church, Ottawa.

The Presbytery of Ottawa records its thanksgiving to God for her life and service.

“And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” (Matthew 25: 40, NRSV)”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**