

THIRSTY FOR MORE THAN A DRINK

Why does he batter at walls that won't break? Why does he give when it's natural to take? Where does he see all the good he can see, and what does he want of me?

What does he want of me?

Aldonza, *Man of La Mancha*

Sometimes, I wish books could sing. If they could, I'd start here with one of the most beautiful pieces I've ever heard in musical theater. It is "Dulcinea," sung by the Don Quixote character in *Man of La Mancha*, a tender but profound love song plopped into the middle of a drama not unlike our story of the Man sent to earth by his Father back home. To listen to it float from the voice of a rich baritone accompanied by an orchestra is chilling—in a really good way. The sound can be as stirring and dramatic as the colors in the sky when the sun has set. Or as intense and profound as staring at Michelangelo's statue of David, and unless you are dead in your bones, you cannot help but be moved by it.

It is, after all, a song of grace.

My husband and I had the privilege of watching the Broadway revival of *Man of La Mancha* a few years back. We were celebrating our anniversary, and because my husband had never seen this particular show, I wanted him to experience the story and the music I'd come to love each time I'd seen it either at a regional or college production. It is the story of Miguel de Cervantes, the sixteenth-century Spanish writer arrested by the Inquisition and thrown into prison. The holding cell is full of thieves and cutthroats, and he and his servant must go on trial for their lives by the other prisoners. For his defense, Cervantes offers the inmates a story he then proceeds to act out—the story of Don Quixote de la Mancha.

Don Quixote is determined to bring goodwill and chivalry back to the “bleak and unbearable world”; as a knight, he hurls down his gauntlet and takes up his destiny, going wherever the “wild winds of fortune” will take him. His is a “holy endeavor” and he dreams an “impossible dream” that proclaims even his willingness “to march into hell for a heavenly cause.” Don Quixote is a man on a mission.

But to those who don't know him, he is a fool who chases windmills. Even to Dulcinea, the beautiful woman whom the knight has chosen as his lady. The only problem is she is known to most men as something else, something entirely different from what the Man of La Mancha knows her as. To them she is the hard and bitter tavern whore known as Aldonza, but to Don Quixote she is Dulcinea, which means “sweet one.”

From the minute he encounters her, Don Quixote identifies her only as Dulcinea, his lady. She thinks he is insane, of course, and argues with him while the other men in the tavern laugh at him. They know better. They know her in ways he never has—and never will.

Still, he is utterly blind to their responses, and he does what every protagonist in a musical does because he can-

not help himself, because he must: he sings. He stares into the eyes of his love as if no one else is in the tavern (or the theater), and he sings an astonishingly beautiful tune (written by Mitch Leigh) with equally beautiful lyrics (written by Joe Darion):

I have dreamed thee too long, never seen thee or touched thee,
but known thee with all my heart,

Half a prayer, half a song, thou hast always been with me,
though we have been always apart.

Dulcinea . . . Dulcinea . . . I see heaven when I see thee,
Dulcinea, and thy name is like a prayer an angel whispers
. . . Dulcinea . . . Dulcinea!

If I reach out to thee, do not tremble and shrink from the touch
of my hand on thy hair.

Let my fingers but see thou art warm and alive, and no phantom
to fade in the air.

Dulcinea . . . Dulcinea . . . I have sought thee, sung thee,
dreamed thee, Dulcinea! Now I've found thee, and the world shall
know thy glory. Dulcinea . . . Dulcinea!¹

The song ends with the mocking chants of "Dulcinea" from the drunken men, but not without the Man of La Mancha's proclamation completely drowning them out and baffling his lady with his grace in the process. Nonetheless, she does not—will not—believe him. In fact, the next time they meet, Aldonza does her best to convince him of who she really is: "the most casual bride of the murdering scum of the earth . . . I am no one! I'm nothing! I'm only Aldonza the whore!"

Then in a fit of absolute self-protection, she calls him the "cruellest of all" men because his kindness is too much to endure: "Blows and abuse I can take and give back again, tenderness I cannot bear!" Yet, Don Quixote vows to defend

her honor. No matter what she says, he bows before her and softly says over and over, "Thou art still my lady . . . now and forever thou art my lady Dulcinea!" When she cannot take his terrible benevolence anymore, she screams in despair at him and drives him away.

It isn't until the final scene of the drama, when the hero is dying center stage, that we hear the most marvelous line in the entire story. It comes from—who else?—Aldonza, who despite her past and her protests has watched what the Man of La Mancha has done, seen the power of his hope, and comes to a place where she whispers, "My name . . . is Dulcinea."

It is a moment of conversion. Of grace apprehended. Of love realized. Of mercy breaking into her world, a world where she learns that everything she thought was real was anything but. Until now. Now she was a lady. Now she was who she was supposed to be. Now she was Dulcinea, the sweet one.

My husband and I sat for many quiet moments after the curtain came down and the applause of the audience died. We sighed at the goodness of the story and eventually wandered from the theater deeply affected by the performance we'd just witnessed. Like all great art has a habit of doing, the musical reminded us again of the bigger story behind the intoxicating exchange between Cervantes's Don Quixote and Dulcinea. For we both knew that her encounter with love was one that is happening today everywhere we look: whether on the streets of Europe, in churches in Australia, revivals across Africa, or gatherings throughout North America, you name it, God is captivating his people with a mercy like few have ever seen before.

Those who don't know him, of course, call it foolishness.

But the reality of the Scriptures has always claimed that some would be captivated by Christ while others would call him a fool. For throughout the biblical narrative, One

sings the names of those he loves and in doing so, he “seeks them and dreams them,”² transforming their lives with the absolute certainty of his affection. And they—and we—are shaped for eternity by the proclamation of this extravagant love that comes in spite of the people who receive it. Whether Abraham or David, Mary or Peter, the diverse and real women and men whose stories are woven into the Bible’s narrative have this one thing in common: God has pursued them in love. Don Quixote is smitten by his lady.

And from my experiences talking with women here and abroad, I think there are many “Dulcineas” living in our contemporary times. They were first “Aldonzas” who fought with God over the stories of their lives until finally he won them over with his sacrificial love, giving them a new identity in the process. Sure, some are still fighting—we all do. We are, after all, human; we get defensive and protective because we do not want to get hurt. And too often in our heart of hearts, we do not really believe we could be loved, let alone be lovable. Besides, we know that though the truth of the gospel is like a fairy tale as well, we sometimes believe it is simply too good to be true.

But it is true. And many other stories of women who encounter the Lord of the Gospels confirm it. Like Aldonza, they too were desperate women whose lives were marked by lies and pain and deception. They accepted each as inevitable but always hoped for more, thirsted for something else to satisfy them. Something especially that would bring them to a place of honor and dignity, rather than the shame or degradation they had known all their lives.

A Woman of Thirst

Perhaps there is no greater example of this transforming power than in the true story of the Samaritan woman at the well recorded in the fourth chapter of John’s Gospel. Her

seemingly chance encounter with Jesus changed everything she'd ever known. It is a story of even greater passion and grace than Dulcinea's because it comes to us not from Broadway but directly from the book we call God's Word. God ordained the story first by "creating" it and then by insuring its inclusion in the Gospel written by the "disciple whom Jesus loved." Consequently, it is significant, and though historic, it is one that speaks to us today as we go about the business of our daily lives.

Before we dive into her story, though, I think it is important first to consider four questions that can help us better understand these Scripture stories and passages. These questions often guide my personal Bible study as well as my preparation whenever I've been invited to teach at retreats or conferences; like a richly textured four-course meal, they help us better appreciate the fullness of the biblical "flavors" and the impact each could have.

The first question to ask is what is the *context* of the passage? What's happened before in the culture and to the characters in the story that might affect its meaning and its message? What's the bigger picture that this scene is set in? That question helps us better understand all of Scripture as a unified book and keeps us from creating theologies (or belief systems) that might spring up from one single verse. It's always dangerous to compartmentalize verses—or take them out of context—and forget that God's Word is one sacred text, comprised of many layers that blend together to reflect God's purposes.

The second question is one that lingers from my days as an English teacher. (Blame it on the English teachers!) When coming to specific verses, we need to consider what the *conflict* in the passage is. What or who is at odds? What or who is being confronted? Buechner astutely reminds us that before the gospel can be good news, it must be bad news first. That is the essence of conflict—two or more forces at odds that become the why behind the story and

the driving force of all literature. In other words, there is inherently some aspect of a fallen world that needs to be redeemed, some bad that needs a touch of good, some evil chaos that needs taming and ordering by righteousness. Some lostness that needs saving.

Adventure films help us understand this; we watch not to find out what ultimately happens—because we already believe good will conquer evil. No, we watch to see the hero figure out how to get out of each pickle she finds herself in. Most times, the stakes keep getting raised in these films, making each obstacle harder, higher, or more harmful than the last. But that is the real reason we keep watching—to see how in the world she will ever overcome each particular problem thrown at her by her opponents, even though we already know she will. It's the thrill of the adventure!

Once we know the context and the conflict, we then ask what the *counsel* is we could draw from the passage. What new insights could we learn? What does Dulcinea, or rather the Samaritan woman at the well, teach us? Each life, each story, each passage has a purpose. Our job is, with God's help, to discover its wisdom and glean from its truth at the moment we encounter it.

But lest it become merely an academic experience in which we identify the answers to these three "C" questions, we must ask the most important question of all, the question that arises from the same place of desperation we see in Aldonza as well as in each of these nameless women in the Gospels. How can this story lead us to *conversion*, or how can it help us change? No matter how much she fights or pretends it is not so, Aldonza really does want to become Dulcinea. Just as our Samaritan woman ultimately desires the type of satisfaction that will quench more than her daily thirst for water. These women want change, are desperate for it. And I'm guessing most of us are too.

And so the stories of these nameless women in the Gospels inspire us with their personal transformations while at the same time pointing us toward the road of conversion. That is after all what really matters, right? To grow, to examine our lives in the light of God's Word so that we become more like the people he's created us to be, the women and men whose lives—and names—are changed by a song of absolute acceptance.

First, though, we must recognize our need. The story of this real woman whose name we don't even know but whose moment in history has been documented by the apostle John is our teacher for now. It is the story of a thirsty Samaritan woman, who "happened" upon a hero who changed her life. And then changed the lives of almost everyone who knew her.

The Context

John probably wrote his Gospel toward the end of the first century after the mission trips of Paul and before he wrote the last book of the Bible, Revelation. Like all of the Gospels, his conveys unique qualities of its author. We see John's knowledge as an intimate eyewitness of Christ's three years of ministry; his understanding of Jewish thinking, customs, and geography; and his appreciation of Greek culture, which was the dominant culture in terms of the rest of the world. Greeks were the cultural elites of their day, sensual, philosophical, authoritative. People spoke Greek then in the way English is spoken today. John knew this and wrote accordingly.

What else distinguishes John's Gospel from Matthew's, Mark's, or Luke's? Because its primary purpose is evangelistic, it reveals more of the relational, personal side of Jesus. The story of our Samaritan woman certainly confirms both. In fact, theirs is one of the longer dialogues included in the

Gospels between Jesus and a person, let alone a woman, reflecting both his desire to win her over and his personal concern for her.

This “chance” meeting took place in the first year of Jesus’s ministry, when he left Judea and the region around Jerusalem to go back again to his native Galilee in the north of Israel. Between Judea and Galilee lies Samaria, a region of about 1600 square miles, stretching between the Jordan River on the east and the Mediterranean Sea on the west. The Samaritans were descendants of Jews, but they intermarried with the Assyrians who occupied the area from 726 to 721 BC, during one of the many times Israel was conquered. Their intermarriages with the Gentiles enabled them to survive, and they often fared better than the Jews who resisted such. Consequently, a great animosity grew between the Samaritans and the Jews, who considered the Samaritans half-breeds and heretics.

Because they believed Samaritans had long been religiously and ethnically mixed, or syncretistic, and blended pagan worship with Jewish tradition, Jews did not venture into Samaria. To devout Jews, Samaritans were a compromised, unclean people they avoided, not engaged with. They had “affairs” with many gods, and therefore were considered religiously “promiscuous.” The perception was so intense that when Jews had to travel back and forth between Judea in the south and Galilee in the north they avoided Samaria altogether! Instead of taking the direct route through Samaria, they would go down to Jericho, cross the Jordan River into Perea (which is now the kingdom of Jordan), and then head north, not crossing back over the river until they were well north of Samaria and due east of Nazareth. This turned what would otherwise have been about a sixty-mile trip into almost a hundred miles—which was no small thing before the days of cars, buses, or trains. But they believed it was worth walking the extra miles so as not to risk encountering the Samaritans.

Not Jesus, though. Because of who he was, he could not, as one minister put it, “follow a trail that fear and hatred had blazed.” So Jesus intentionally went through Samaria, that part of town we’d know today as an “inner city.” Instead of going around the ‘hood from one stretch of town to the suburbs, Jesus took the most direct route: right through the area where graffiti, broken glass, and boarded buildings were as common as manicured lawns in a suburb. It was a place where a typical righteous man would never go. Ever.

Yet John says that, “He had to go to Samaria.” Well, no, he did not have to go through Samaria, at least geographically. Then why did John include this strange detail? Perhaps he knew that Jesus’s decision to take this road had more to do with his greater mission than with his travel sensibilities or his attention to religious customs.

By doing so, he met a woman at the well who was a mirror of her culture. Life had left her hard and tough, an Aldonza of the Samaritans. In that time period, she had three strikes against her: she was a woman, a Samaritan, and promiscuous. Her difficult lifestyle was likely why she came to the well at a time of day when most respectable women would not usually have drawn their water. Most would have drawn it either early in the morning or at the end of the day.

So why is their conversation so significant? First, it is important to know that women rarely interacted with religious men publicly, let alone a woman like her interacting with a man like Jesus. She knew it, others knew it, and Jesus certainly knew it. As the great British minister Charles Spurgeon put it in a sermon he preached (rather prophetically, I think) in 1886:

First, it was sufficiently offensive that the person with whom Jesus was conversing was a woman. My beloved sisters, you owe much to the Gospel, for it is only by its agency

that you are raised to your proper place. For what said the rabbis? "Rather burn the sayings of the law than teach them to a woman." Again, "Let no man prolong conversation with a woman; let no one converse with a woman in the streets, nor even with his own wife." Women were thought to be unfit for profound religious instruction and altogether inferior beings. My sisters, we do not think that you are superior to us, though some of you perhaps fancy so. But we are right glad to own your equality and to know that in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female. Jesus has lifted you up to your true place, side by side with man. Even the apostles were tainted at first with that horrible superstition that made them marvel that Jesus openly talked with a woman.³

So we know what's happening in a cultural context: women were considered second-class, inferior beings, utterly unfit for religious instruction by respectable rabbis. Samaritans were marginalized and hated by the cultural leaders of the time, and women like this one who had multiple "husbands" were deemed no better than property.

But what of the woman's personal context? She obviously was at the well because she was thirsty, yet her track record suggests she was thirsty for more than just water. She'd been married many times over, and so she knew she was considered damaged goods, unclean, and unworthy. She was a lot like Samaria (and a lot like Aldonza): desperate, loose, confused, lonely, and hurt.

Still, I can't help but think she was immensely thirsty for life, passionate for intimacy and meaning. Why else would she have had so many husbands? We don't know the circumstances of each marriage, but we can surmise that she was never fully satisfied with her relationships. Why? Because no man could ever fill her parched and empty soul; they were never meant to. Only God would satisfy the longings of this woman as he does for every human.

This, then, is the longing behind every other longing or desire we have—the longing for Jesus.

Her personal story taps into what I've experienced personally and observed corporately as a fundamental insecurity in women: the disbelief that she—that we—could be chosen. Even the way she responded to Jesus's questions with all of her "yes, buts . . ." suggests she was astonished that Jesus talked with her at all and made the requests he did of her. When his apostles returned, they reinforced her insecurity because they couldn't believe their leader would be talking with her either. "Tainted by the horrible superstition," as Spurgeon called it.

Throughout their conversation, the Samaritan woman used a variety of desperate comments to deflect from the deeper matters Christ wanted to confront: "You have nothing to draw with," "I have no husband," "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain." And when she couldn't think of any better questions, after all of her arguments, she gave in and became practical: "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water" (v. 15).

Perhaps her boldness signaled to Jesus that she was willing to consider what he had to say. So he pushed and confronted her on her relationships with men. By this point, she didn't deny it or get defensive. Still, she must have stared at her Don Quixote with skeptical eyes because though the reality of the experience suggested she was in fact hearing this man invite her to drink of his eternal water, she was trapped by her cultural mores and a lifetime of lies that this could be happening at all. It is as if she was saying, "Well, gee, Mister, what you say sure sounds good, but it just ain't possible, at least until the Messiah comes, and when he does, he'll explain everything . . ."

Her personal story, her context—like all of ours—set the stage to the obvious conflict she encountered with Jesus, a conflict where he would challenge her presuppositions,

her insecurities, and the things (idols) she might have put her faith in—the material world, relationships, traditions, expectations. In the same way, we bring all of our lives—our history, our baggage, our past, our future—into our relationship with Christ when he pursues us and initiates a conversation with us. And this is what remains a remarkable aspect of the story: given the context of this woman and the culture in which she lived, even knowing all of who this woman was, Jesus still “had to go to Samaria.” He, too, was thirsty from his journey yet decided it was as good an opportunity as any to sit down and chat with this woman. To pursue his Dulcinea. To sing her into being.

It was a scene rife with conflict.

The Conflict

So we have a Perfect Man, God incarnate, pursuing a very imperfect woman for all the world to see. In spite of the cultural context that suggested religious men should not talk with such women, Jesus singled her out. He pursued this woman with a past though she hadn’t done a single thing to earn his attention. She was merely performing her daily menial task of getting water! The last thing she probably thought would happen that day was that she’d run into some radical young rabbi on his way north. If she had known, she’d have at least cleaned herself up a bit, or perhaps she wouldn’t have gotten out of bed at all. But she did get out of bed, thirsty, worn out, and a mess, on her way to the well, where she didn’t expect to see another living soul. Let alone a man who would challenge her like he did.

Jesus, too, could have been anywhere else: with the crowds teaching; with his disciples picking out food for lunch; napping in a local hotel. Instead, he went after the “unworthy one,” the individual who never saw him coming

but had always hoped someone like him existed somewhere. In so doing, he struck a chord that resonates with every contemporary woman I've ever known: feeling unworthy but hoping against hope that the answer to our hearts' longing would come after us, would pursue us.

He did, and he still does.

The problem with this part of the story, though, is that holiness and sin don't mix, then or now, which means their confrontation would lead—like it always does—to other confrontations. We had a mess of a woman meeting a Messiah of a Man, and as his light began to shine on her, one small dark thing after another became exposed, until she began to understand just how dark and how small she really was. Just how much she needed a savior.

The bad news came before the good news; in fact, the bad news in this case became the good news. Before that could happen, though, Jesus had to confront her on an equally human level, asking for water since they were both thirsty. To her, however, his question was loaded, given the context in which it was asked. She countered with two sincere questions: "Are you sure you know who you're asking? (You talking to *me?*)," followed by, "Where can you get this living water?" By this point in her desperate life, she was open to anyone who would give her a clue to find any meaning at all in the ragged life she'd lived so far.

Then Christ confronted her lust, or her passion for intimacy, approval, and connection. How did she respond? Unlike Aldonza, she never argued with him or got defensive. In fact, the more he talked, the bolder she seemed to get in her responses to him, as if she thought to herself, *This guy's safe*. And when she finally confessed with ultimate honesty—"I have no husband"—Jesus gave her another clue of who he was when he revealed her shady life with men. Then in a strange turn in the conversation, he began to talk with her about worship.

Why? Because he knew that was what she was born for, ultimately, to direct her passionate devotion to her Creator so that she no longer worshiped men or sex or traditions or any other god that might keep her from her true purpose: to worship God. For she (like all of us) was wired for that one beautiful and eternal reason: worship.

If we do not worship God, we can be sure we will worship something, or someone, else. Knowing this, Jesus invited this woman to worship him, and consequently she was taken from her usual course of daily living and moved to do a special new work for God the Father.

Hence, the Good News. The Comedy of the Gospel!

What a joy to read how such an encounter with Jesus, the living water, overflowed into every aspect of this woman's life. She had come to the well that noonday to get water, to do one job, and something entirely different happened. Suddenly, the mundane turned into an adventure because of Jesus. So much so that when she realized just who it was she'd met, she left with such urgency and such enthusiasm that she seemed to forget why she'd come to the well at all. John tells us that she left her water jar behind. But because of who she was, I doubt she could have afforded to abandon it altogether. No, she intended to come back for it, to come back to Jesus with her friends.

How could she do otherwise? Considering Christ's unprecedented conversation with her in public, because his light exposed her darkness and his promise captured her heart, her passion for life was suddenly transformed. She became instantly earnest to introduce others—who also knew her past—to this man. She did not want to show them some new and exciting religion. Nor did she want to show them the error of their ways, or some nifty set of values that could magically make their lives better.

No, she became focused entirely on bringing the people in her life (probably even the lover with whom she was currently sleeping) to see the man who—of all things—showed her

her sin. She wanted them to meet the man who could be the Messiah, the long-awaited hope of people like her; indeed, the man who actually said, "I am he." After all, he had exposed her transgressions and revealed her true self; he had identified her thirst and revealed his nature for quenching it. In the process, she had seen both her sinfulness *and* his forgiveness and love as the Messiah, the bad news and the good news! He offered her true water that both cleansed and satisfied. And she got a glimpse of her true purpose: to worship the eternal God as the lady she was always meant to be.

She did not suddenly try to be someone she was not. She had simply tasted enough of the living water to know this would satisfy all of her thirsts. And if it could do that for her, surely it could do that for others. Like a beautiful song you can't help but want others to hear, she had to let others know about the prophet at the well.

And so she did. Not with a sermon or a formula but with a story and a question: "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?"

The Counsel

What can we learn from the Samaritan woman at the well? What counsel does she give us? First, she came to the well to do one job, and after encountering Jesus she was given another. He was—and is—able to transform even the most mundane routine when we have eyes to see him alive and working in the moment. Second, though she talked of the physical and material world, he did not dismiss those issues as unimportant, but he used them to turn the conversation toward her deeper spiritual needs. So much so that he ended in a discussion of worship. Even as the disciples came back offering him physical food, he directed them instead to the spiritual. He offered them sustenance that nothing else would provide: himself.

An offer that still sings to us across the centuries.

But how? How could he do this? How was it possible for this man from Galilee to make such a claim? In fact, how could this young carpenter-turned-rabbi, this radical Jewish teacher who'd been born in a barn, make any of the claims he did in his interaction with this woman? Or in the words he gave to his disciples?

Because he knew who he was as God's Son—the second Person in the Almighty Trinity—and he knew his purpose, why he came to earth in the first place. He knew that he would soon enough hang on a cross for all of them and cry out, "I thirst!" He would take on their thirsts and longings and hungers so that they—so that we—would be filled with his abundant and sacrificial life.

As the Samaritan woman talked with the man who would thirst for her sake, she suddenly understood that she had *not* been doing what she was born for; instead—and this is another lesson—she was given a new but unique opportunity to worship God and to point others to him. She responded not by instantly becoming Sally Spiritual but by simply being herself, with her own personality and a redeemed sense of dignity.

She apparently went back to her people exactly as she had always been and told them honestly, "Come and see." She did not say to them, "You fellow sinners, you pagans, you idiots! Clean up your lives!" She only pointed them to Jesus and invited them to see for themselves. She was a lot like the fickle man known as Peter who became the Rock (as I say in my book *Reckless Faith: Living Passionately as Imperfect Christians*), who was called for a calling. She was called first to Jesus, and then as a result of who he was (and not what she did), she was given a whole new purpose to match her individual passion.

History suggests that after this single encounter at the well, there was nothing short of a revival in Samaria, largely because of the nameless woman's testimony (in

verse 39). Which is another lesson we can learn: once we enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, everyone around us is affected as well. She was invited to drink of the living water Jesus offered her not merely to meet her need but for a much bigger purpose—as we always are too.

Becoming a Christian (or a follower of Christ) has never only been about our own personal salvation. Contrary to popular American “theology,” coming to Jesus is never about having him solve the problems of life. He is not a spiritual genie whose purpose is to make us happy, as if he owed us anything. No, entering a relationship with the God of the universe through Jesus Christ is never an idealistic or individualistic act, though it is a personal decision. Instead, it is about a bigger purpose, a bigger story, a bigger community known as the kingdom of God. In the process, Christ’s life automatically pours out of ours into others, like yeast in dough.

But before the woman went back to her community to tell them about the prophet, did she first clean up her own life to “look” better? Did she become instantly holy and righteous when Jesus declared to her “I who speak to you am he”? Of course not. She acknowledged the reality that this man had accepted her as she was, affirmed her as the woman she was always meant to be, and so she simply, honestly, remained herself—only now she was fulfilled. Something inside her changed that day, enough so she could whisper, “My name is Dulcinea.”

I bring out this point because I’ve known friends through the years who’ve told me they needed first to change their lives, to give up this unhealthy relationship or quit that bad habit, before they could become Christians. But the counsel from this story suggests otherwise; that if we’ll simply say yes to the person of Jesus, then he can be trusted to take care of the rest. We do not know what happened to this woman and the men in her life once the Messiah had smitten her.

We only know his love made all the difference for her, and for her community of friends.

Considering all she'd lived through, how could she not respond to Jesus by telling her village about him? But notice she did not preach at her old friends, nor did she go on and on about Jesus, arguing with them or trying on her own ability to convince them of his truth. She simply went to them and pointed to Jesus. "Come and see," she said, implying that together they would go to the Messiah as equals, as friends, not as righteous and pagans, believer and unbeliever, but as fellow sinners in need of grace.

She was simply one thirsty soul telling another where to find a drink, one that would last.

The Conversion

So her life was transformed, converted, and changed because of a "chance" encounter while doing a mundane task. Then her friends and neighbors were too. Not because she was doing anything spiritual or exceptional but because she had the humility to accept a spontaneous meeting with a man who told her who she was: a sinner with a past in need of a Savior who could offer her a future. That was the essence of their exchange and the truth of what she accepted. And certainly it was the worst, the best, and the most freeing news she had ever heard. Why?

Because now she would do what she was born for. *She* was the worshiper of whom he spoke, the fields that he had described to his disciples. *She* was the lovely outcast for whom he—like Don Quixote—would offer his heart and his life and would be willing—like Don Quixote—to "march into hell for a heavenly cause."⁴ Why? So that she would become a lady, a woman of dignity with a kingdom

purpose, one who had found in him what she had thirsted for all her life.

Yes, a woman with an intensely parched soul was changed—converted—into a woman of deep satisfaction, all because of the love of a man who would die a suffocating death on a cross for her sake, who would give up all that filled him to fill her. A man who invited her to forgo the other idols in her life to instead worship him, the living water, so that everyone who knew her would be affected.

The fountain spilled over again and again!

As it does still today. Because Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (see Heb. 13:8), his invitation to us now is as real as it was when he stopped at noon by the well in Samaria to chat with a woman whose name we don't know. He still seeks the type of worshipers who will worship him with spirit (passion) and truth (honesty), just as they are. He still seeks those women and men daring enough to admit that no other human, no idol, no achievement or any other thing can satisfy the passions of their hearts. Only the Living Water can make such a promise—and keep it.

Only he could fulfill the Scripture that the prophet Isaiah described:

The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the LORD will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs. I will put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. I will set pines in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress together, so that people may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of the LORD has done this, that the Holy One of Israel has created it.

41:17–20

The call remains for us to, “Come and see.” To come, as many other Christians throughout the ages have done, and drink deeply from the well of his salvation. To see the victory of his grace. Could this be, after all, the Messiah, the longing behind every longing we have?

— IN-BETWEEN REFLECTION —

1. After having read chapter 1, what new insights stand out to you about the story of the Samaritan woman at the well?
2. What struck you from the story of Don Quixote and Dulcinea?
3. The woman at the well is from Samaria. Why do you think this is an important detail in the story? Which part of the story from John 4 could you most relate to and why?
4. Jesus intentionally went to this woman and invited her into a relationship with him. In so doing, it changed her calling, even her very purpose in life. What effect does her new calling have, and how might this speak to you in your current vocational situation?
5. In what ways does the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman change your view of the words *desperate* and *passion*?
6. How does the story of your own life reflect the truth of John 4:1–42?

DIGGING DEEPER

All humans are thirsty for meaning, significance, and satisfaction. Often these needs are met through the gift of relationship and intimacy with our Creator and with his people. Examine the following verses in light of the story of the Samaritan woman at the well: Psalm 107:9, Isaiah 55:1, and John 19:28–29. What do they teach you about the metaphor of thirst and water?

Of the four Gospel writers, only John records the story of the Samaritan woman and of Christ on the cross saying, “I am thirsty.” What else distinguishes John’s Gospel and how does this affect your relationship with God?

PREPARATION

LUKE 13:10–17

A Crippled Woman Healed on the Sabbath

¹⁰On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, ¹¹and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.” ¹³Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

¹⁴Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.”

¹⁵The Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? ¹⁶Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?”

¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

When you are ready, continue reflecting on the following question:

Perhaps you’ve read this story before. What new insights or observations jumped out to you as you read her story anew in this Gospel account? Jot them down. Take a few moments to reflect before reading chapter 2.

Prayer: *“May the power of your love, O Lord, fiery and sweet as honey, wean my heart from all that is under heaven, so that I may die for love of your love, You Who were so good as to die for love of my love.”*

St. Francis of Assisi