

## **Becoming a Community of Living Water**

Sermon on Hebrews 5:11–6:12 and John 4:5–42 for the 3rd Sunday in Lent

At first glance the two passages we have read seem very different: one a stern exhortation to a weary community, the other a gentle, boundary-breaking conversation at a well. Yet both texts speak to the heart of what it means to be a community of faith that is growing, questioning, and becoming more fully alive to the Spirit's movement. Surely, we are not called simply to believe but to grow—to stretch our understanding, to deepen our compassion, and to dismantle the barriers that keep God's living water from flowing freely among us.

### **1. Hebrews 5:11–6:12 — The Call to Spiritual Maturity**

The writer of Hebrews is clearly frustrated. "You need milk, not solid food," he says—a vivid image of a community stuck in spiritual infancy. But this is not a scolding for its own sake. It is a pastoral plea: Do not settle for a small, safe, unexamined faith.

Progressive theologian Marcus Borg reminds us that faith is not about "believing certain things to be true," but about "a relationship of trust and transformation." Hebrews echoes this. The issue is not ignorance but stagnation—faith that has stopped growing.

Progressive Insights: Maturity is active, not passive.

The writer is not threatening punishment; he is urging the community to take responsibility for its own growth. Spiritual maturity requires curiosity, courage, and engagement with the complexities of life.

The warning is communal, not individual.

Hebrews 6:4–6 has often been misused as a threat of eternal damnation. Progressive scholars emphasise that the concern is not individual salvation but the health of the community. Turning away from the values of the Gospel—justice, compassion, solidarity—has real consequences for the whole body.

Foundations are meant to be built upon.

The "elementary teachings" are not dismissed; they are the groundwork for a deeper, more justice-oriented discipleship. Rowan Williams describes Christian maturity as "the capacity to see the world truthfully and to act with freedom for the sake of others." That is the solid food Hebrews longs for us to taste.

#### *A Question for Us*

Where are we being called to grow?

Are we content with familiar answers, or are we willing to wrestle with the hard questions of faith, justice, and inclusion?

### **2. John 4:5–42 — Breaking Down Barriers at the Well**

If Hebrews calls us to grow, John shows us what that growth looks like in practice.

Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well—enemy territory, social taboo, religious boundary. But to appreciate the radical nature of this encounter, we need to understand the social world she inhabited.

The well was the town's gathering place, the social hub where people met twice a day to exchange news, stories, and—inevitably—gossip. This woman had long been the subject of that gossip. Her presence would have silenced conversations, drawn averted eyes, and perhaps even provoked hostile looks. Eventually, she learned to avoid the crowds. She came

to the well at noon—the hottest, loneliest hour—because it was safer to endure the heat than the judgement.

Traditionally, she has been portrayed as immoral. But in Jesus' world, women could not initiate divorce. A man could dismiss his wife with a simple declaration. It is entirely possible that this woman had been passed from man to man, used, abandoned, and left without protection or dignity. She may have sought affection in all the wrong places simply because she had so few choices. We cannot know the details, but we can say this: she was far more likely a victim of a patriarchal system than a villain within it.

And yet—this is crucial—she is no theological lightweight. Beneath the layers of pain and exclusion beats the heart of someone thirsty for God. She knows the traditions, the debates about worship, the hope for the Messiah. The town had written her off, but Jesus sees her spiritual depth long before anyone else does.

When she arrives at the well and sees a Jewish man, her heart must have sunk. Jews avoided Samaria; men avoided speaking to women in public; rabbis avoided women altogether. Ancient sayings warned men not to speak to women in the street, not even their wives. Teaching a woman the Law was considered scandalous.

Yet Jesus breaks every one of these boundaries.

He speaks to her with dignity.

He asks her for water rather than issuing a command.

He treats her as a conversation partner, not an object of shame.

When Jesus mentions her husbands, it is not to condemn her but to reveal that he understands her story—and that her deepest thirst cannot be quenched by relationships, status, or social acceptance. Only living water—God's uncontainable grace—can do that.

And here is the miracle of the story:

the very past that isolated her becomes the testimony that brings her community to Jesus.

“What an alchemy of grace,” as one preacher puts it, that the wounds which once drove her into hiding become the doorway through which others encounter hope.

She who avoided the town now runs back into it.

She who was silenced now becomes the first evangelist in John's Gospel.

She who was excluded becomes the bridge between Jesus and her people.

This is what living water does.

It restores dignity.

It heals shame.

It transforms isolation into witness.

### **3. Bringing the Texts Together — A Faith That Grows and Includes**

Hebrews calls us to grow up. John shows us how. Together they invite us into a faith that is:

Dynamic — always learning, always questioning, always expanding.

Inclusive — breaking down walls of gender, race, class, and doctrine.

Transformative — not just for individuals but for whole communities.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us that faith is “a summons to imagine the world as though God were truly sovereign.” That means imagining a world where:

outsiders become teachers,

women's voices are honoured,

old hostilities dissolve,

truth is spoken without fear,  
grace flows freely,  
and God's love is not rationed but abundant.

This is the maturity Hebrews longs for. This is the living water Jesus offers.

**Becoming a Community of Living Water**

As we leave today, may we commit ourselves to a faith that grows and includes. May we be a community that:

wrestles with the hard questions,  
reaches across divides,  
listens to marginalised voices,  
and offers the living water of hope to all.

And may we, like the Samaritan woman, become witnesses to the transformative power of God's love—bold, curious, and unafraid.

Amen.