

Drink of Living Water

The Samaritan Woman at the Well

John 4:5-42 Exodus 17:1-7
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Water! It's among the most crucial components on earth when it comes to sustaining life. And while a drastic over-abundance of water can be deadly, like with the tsunami in Japan earlier this month, a drastic under-abundance of water can be deadly as well.

Chances are that all of us, at one time or another, has frantically declared how we were "dying of thirst". Yet I doubt if any of us have really been that desperate. And unless you've ever lived in a truly desert climate, most of us don't quite realize the extent of the relationship between the earth and life-giving water. Most of us just take it for granted that the water we desire will be there when we turn on the faucet.

Ancient Palestine however, like much of the Middle East, always has had to live with a scarcity of water. **Water, therefore, both literally and figuratively, is one of the primary images used by authors throughout the writings of both the Old and New Testaments** – from the Creation Story in Genesis when the Spirit first swept over the face of the waters, to the parting of the Red Sea to help the Israelites escape the pursuing Egyptians, to Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan.

Water is also the dominant image in the scripture readings for this Third Sunday in Lent. These two stories, from Exodus and John, to put it most simply, are **a reflection upon human need and divine grace**. The lectionary moves us from literal thirst and physical water, in a story about Moses and the thirsty Israelites in the wilderness, to a lesson about a spiritual thirst and the need for living water that brings eternal life. The story of the Samaritan woman at the well, from the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John, much like the Moses story in Exodus, reveals our dependence on God – from both a physical and spiritual standpoint. **At issue is how to tap into this never-ending, life-giving source. And when we do, what are the results and expectations?**

Interestingly, this story is the longest recorded dialogue between Jesus and anyone else in the Bible – a conversation between a Jewish male religious leader and an unnamed marginalized woman from an enemy people, the Samaritans. We miss, unfortunately, the extent of what an incredibly scandalous story this was. The first, original readers of John's gospel, however, would have been very aware and deeply shocked. And while powerful enough on a surface level, the author of John has filled this story with many deeper spiritual meanings and references.

Ultimately, this text is about transformation, particularly how Jesus transforms traditional social and religious conventions and expectations, and challenges the status quo. I love when the Bible does that! First of all, Jesus' request of "Give me a drink," was a violation of social and religious customs. Jews would not drink out of a Samaritan cup, since they considered all Samaritans unclean, and anything they touched would be

unclean. Secondly, it was improper for a man (especially a rabbi) to talk to a woman in public. This is supported in the story itself by the "astonishment" of the disciples when they returned later and saw that Jesus had been speaking with a woman.

We must not underestimate the impact of these introductory verses in this story. For the status quo is indeed severely challenged by Jesus. For instance, **he acts intentionally to break down the traditional, socially acceptable prejudices and dividing walls between males and females, and between people of opposing nationalities.** This, in and of itself, makes this story still relevant in our day and age.

So before we even get to the issue of living water and what that means, **we are challenged to consider what customs and prejudicial traditions of our day need to be transformed, even overturned.** What current socially acceptable barriers and dividing walls that alienate people are we, as people of God, called to break through and tear down, **regardless of the shock and protest of many in traditional elements of church and culture who hold on so tight and fast to such prejudices?**

Is that not part of our mission as a congregation? In what ways do you already see us fulfilling that mission and ministry? I'll leave that for you to answer since there are still 34 more verses of this 37-verse story to get through.

A brief comment needs to be made on why we believe this woman was marginalized, even among her own people. We're told that she came to the well at about 12 o'clock noon. Generally, women drew water either earlier or later in the day to avoid the heat. This task was typically done together with other women as an important act of social contact and interaction. The fact that this particular woman came in the heat of the day, and all by herself, indicates that for some reason (for which we are not told) she was seen as an outcast, even by her own people. This point, as we will see, only enhances the act of God's inclusive grace.

This story goes on to make a big deal out of the differences in nationality and religious identity between Jesus and the woman. Unfortunately, I will have to explain at another occasion the historical situation of why there was so much "bad blood" between Jews and Samaritans.

Let's get to the heart of the matter, the issue of water. Jesus, after requesting a drink of water, speaks to the woman about "living water." Like the Pharisee Nicodemus who misunderstands when he was told about being born again or anew (in the previous chapter in John), the woman misunderstands Jesus as well, hearing his words only on a literal level. This element of misunderstanding Jesus is a common literary technique used by the author of the Gospel of John. It reveals **our own tendency to misunderstand, and our own need to learn and dig deeper.**

The phrase, "living water," can mean on a literal level "running water", as in a stream, or from an upwelling spring. Its water is fresh, easily accessible, and always available. **Living water, therefore, represents God's love and grace and presence, in that it flows freely and is ever available.** Recognizing that we are loved and blessed by God does indeed have the power to transform lives.

This kind of water, on a physical level, is meant to contrast with the kind of water that is found in a well. Well water, as opposed to spring water is still and confined, often filled with impurities, and it takes a lot of effort to make it available. Though admittedly arrogant to say so, **I see the understanding of God and the role of the church as revealed through the perspective of progressive Christianity more attuned with this living water, and traditional orthodox Christian doctrine and belief more in line with stagnant well water.** How's that for fightin' words.

The woman in this story asks for this living water, misunderstanding it to mean nothing more than the equivalent of a faucet in her kitchen, so that she won't have to keep coming back to the well. Yet, even though she does not understand what Jesus has to offer, she understands that he offers something that she needs. She becomes, using a common modern term, **a seeker!**

We live in a time, as well, in which countless numbers of people are seeking something to enhance and bring greater meaning to their lives. And though many are leery about organized religion (and understandably so), they somehow know that God has something to offer that they need. **We must constantly address this issue, from an evangelism perspective, of how to reach these seekers. The answer for this congregation, in part, comes in offering an alternative to traditional orthodox belief, with our goal of being a safe and nurturing place where people are welcome to come as they are** – just as Jesus welcomed the woman at the well as she was.

The biblical story then goes on to discuss the issue of the woman having several husbands, followed by a discussion of the proper place to worship God, a declaration of messiahship, then the interaction between Jesus and his disciples with their misunderstanding about the metaphor of food. There are very important lessons to learn from each of these elements of this story. Unfortunately, there's no time to properly address them this morning. So let me jump to the final scene of this story and briefly reflect upon the woman's response to what she has learned and experienced from Jesus.

Upon the disciples return, she leaves her water jar behind and departs to go back to her city. She **bears witness** to the townsfolk about her remarkable encounter and experience with Jesus. Acting as the first female evangelist in the Gospel of John, she brings them to meet Jesus for themselves, and many more lives were transformed.

This story ends, as will I, with a powerful lesson about evangelism. Biblical commentator Brian Stoffregen puts it this way:

If the harvest is plentiful and ripe as Jesus says, and if our population is continually increasing, then why are the numbers decreasing in so many congregations? Perhaps we haven't been willing to look around and see what is right outside our doors. Perhaps we haven't been willing to put forth the labor and share the labors to bring in the harvest.

Whatever the reasons, the one Samaritan woman who has just met Jesus, who misunderstands what he says, who has questions about his identity, brings more people to Jesus than the disciples do... It's not just what we believe, but what difference it makes that we believe.

To use the terminology in the book, *The Future of Faith*, by Harvey Fox, the book currently being discussed by our church's Book Study Small Group, that's **the difference between simply having faith itself and from being bogged down by an emphasis on specific beliefs.**

The Samaritan woman is far from an ideal candidate for evangelism, yet she is very effective. Perhaps you and I can be, as well. Her effectiveness comes because she sticks to what she knows by personal experience. She tells the people what God, through Jesus, has done for her. Now, I'm aware that personal testimony is suspect in many places (especially by Presbyterians), because it is often used to manipulate

people and their emotions rather than to reveal the God that Jesus came to reveal. And even though the woman worked from a marginalized status, her life is transformed and the townspeople listen and respond to her. She performs an important ministry to the entire community.

Herein lies our challenge: How can we bear witness to what we know and understand, revealing to others how we have been transformed, and inviting them to “come and see” for themselves? Do we dare wait, hoping instead for someone else sitting on another pew to do this?

Here’s the point. **We are filled with “living water,” water that is not meant to be kept confined and stagnant, like well water, but rather is like spring water that flows out freely, is easily accessible and is never ending – because God is the source.**

In and through how we live our lives, let us share a cup of *that* water with others.

Amen.