

Quenching Our Thirst

John 4: 1-30; 39-42

Third Sunday in Lent/ 24th February 2008

“He *had* to go to Samaria.” John tells us, “...he left Judea and started back to Galilee,” “But he *had* to go to Samaria.” What we need to know is that he didn’t *have* to go through Samaria, in fact his disciples probably wished he had not. A good Jew avoided Samaria and Samaritans – well, like the plague. A respectable, Law-abiding Jew wouldn’t be caught dead there – or alive. The whole place was disgusting, unclean for them. It all goes back to the time of the exile to Babylon. Israel, that is, the old northern tribes of Ephraim, called Samaritans, remained behind, they were not exiled. They stayed in the land, intermarried with their occupiers, and later allowed Alexander the Great (356-323) to build a temple on Mt. Gerizim. When Judah (the southern tribes) returned from Babylon, preserving Jewish identity was their first priority, and would not accept any temple for the restored nation except the one built by Ezra in Jerusalem (in 450 BC). The Samaritans were followers of Yahweh (at least *they* thought they were). The center of their worship life was the ancient city of Shechem, not Jerusalem. Abraham built an altar for Yahweh in Shechem (Gen 12: 6-8) on his way with Sarah into Canaan. Both Jacob and Joshua are associated with the place. The bones of Joseph were transported there from Egypt (Joshua 24:32). It’s a significant place – or was. In Jesus time a faithful Jew had nothing to do with a Samaritan. They avoided them. The most direct route from Judea to Galilee was through Samaria, however, in order to maintain ritual purity people would rather take the long way around and avoid it altogether.

So when the text says Jesus *had* to go to Samaria, he really didn’t have to go – unless, of course, there was a reason. The main road forks at Shechem, also known, as in John’s Gospel, as Sychar, and in the middle of the road is Jacob’s Well where we find Jesus, sitting alone by the well, “tired out by his journey. It was about noon.” John’s attention to detail, such as the time of day, is remarkable and *always* serves a larger purpose. The hottest time of the day is not the time to get water from the well, particularly this well that was more than 100 feet deep, requiring considerable effort to access the water. You wouldn’t go to the well at this time, unless you *couldn’t* go when the rest of the women went to the well, which was in the cool of the evening. You wouldn’t go in the heat of the day unless you were ostracized or being excluded by your community. Yet, it’s precisely at this time that this Samaritan woman approaches the well to draw water and Jesus begins to speak to her.

There’s something else we need to know. Jesus wasn’t supposed to talk to this woman. Listen to the conventional ethical wisdom of his day: “A man shall not talk with a woman in the street, not even with his own wife, on account of what others may say. He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself. If any man gives a woman a knowledge of God’s Law, it is as though he had taught her lechery.”¹ Jesus says, “Give me a drink.”

¹ Quoted in Calvin Theological Seminary’s Center for Excellence in Preaching:
<http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/viewContent.php?iID=135&sID=1>

What we also need to know is that a Jew and Samaritan could not drink from a common cup or share utensils. A Jew's cup had to be pure, probably made of stone. Hence the startling response of the woman, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" And then Jesus began to share with her the word of God, a knowledge of God that will transform her life.

A well and the water it holds become metaphors for the life of Christ. The ordinary becomes the occasion of the extraordinary, an entrée into the new world that Christ offers to those who "drink" from him. If you knew who was asking you, "Give me a drink," you would be wanting more than water, but living water. Of course she hasn't a clue what Jesus is talking about. Why would she? It's all rather mystical. It's not unlike Jesus' statement to Nicodemus, as we saw last week, when he says to have the life of God you must be born again, or born from above, and Nic gets all confused (John 3). Actually, there's an intentional contrast here between the two stories: Nic comes at night; the woman comes in broad daylight; Nic is the insider, as Pharisee, who realizes he's on the outside of Jesus' message because he doesn't understand it; the woman is an outsider, both as a Samaritan and even in her own community, she's an outsider – burned through five marriages and now has a live-in lover, who is not her husband, and yet by the end of the story she becomes an insider, a follower. She's more open to Jesus' message than Nicodemus was, *probably because she realized just how much was empty and missing in her life.*

"Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" How can you be greater than our ancestor Jacob who provided for us by giving this well. "Drink from this water," and you'll be thirsty again, drink "of the water that I give you" and you'll never be thirsty. "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman doesn't understand. She's being concrete, literal – one might say, practical. "Give me this water so that I may never be thirsty and or have to keep coming here to draw water." In other words, *"Give me this water so that I might never thirst and never again have to come to this blasted well. Because, you see, Mister, it's exhausting, tiring, trying to quench this thirst day after day, carrying the water in these jugs. Going to the well, alone. This well represents and reminds me of all that is wrong with my life – all the shame, the isolation, the exhaustion. Day after day I have to fill this empty jug to quench a thirst that allows me to keep on living, for without water I will die, but what kind of life do I really have? I keep going to this well, even though my life has run dry."*

When Jesus says the water he offers "gushes" up into eternal life, it literally means "leaping up," "welling up." It's a vivid image. It's the word used by Isaiah to describe the lame "leaping up" for joy in Yahweh, the Spirit of the Lord that causes life, real life, eternal life, the life of God. It's how the psalmist spoke of God, "For with you is the fountain of life." (Psalm 36:9). Or it's the kind of life Isaiah tells us God provides, "The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail." (Isaiah 58:11)

She probably realizes that Jesus is talking about more than water when he says, "Fetch your husband – so that he too (!) can share this living water." She lies, probably from shame. She denies having a husband. Then exposes her lies and pretensions and reveals the truth of her life – not to judge, but to *reveal*. There is considerable depth of divine concern for this one

individual; you see, it's why Jesus *had* to go to Samaria. "You're right, you don't have a husband." You have to wonder just how loving the relationship could be. It couldn't have been all that affirming, because if it were she would have been married. After being married five times, she is also extremely poor.

Without mentioning this further, she shifts the conversation to talk theology; she wants to know why her people have been so unfairly mistreated, judged as unlovable. *There will come a time, the time of the Messiah, when all these divisions will be removed, the excluded included, the worship of Yahweh not identified with a space or place, but a worship that reflects the nature of God, who is spirit, whose very spirit is present in the person of the man who sits and talks to a Samaritan woman and says, the one you're really searching for, the one for whom you really thirst, the one you're waiting for to fill your life to change everything is none other than the Messiah.* And then she leaves the well and her empty jug behind and runs to tell the others. "Come and see."

Did you notice that she left the jug behind? *It's the empty jar that's perhaps most significant here because what she's really thirsting for won't be found in that well.*²

Are you thirsty? I wish John told us her name; it's known only to God. Maybe John wants us to put our own names in the narrative, if we could get beyond gender differences, of course. I think she stands for all of us who are thirsty for something more, but not really sure what it is. Or maybe, she represents people who think that their thirst can be satisfied one way, only to discover that they're all the more empty inside, something is still missing.

Are you thirsty? It's tough to know for us. We have such an odd association with water today. Sure we know it's the foundation of human existence, but, until recently we just assumed it will always be here. We took it for granted. Just turn on the faucet. The water supply for Atlanta last fall was dangerously low. The earth is losing water, fast. The Vice-President of the World Bank, Ismail Serageldin, warned that the next world war will be over water, not oil. Where it might seem we have enough, it can't be used. In the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Coleridge (1772-1834) was perhaps prophetic when we wrote, "Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink." Less than 1% of the world's fresh water is readily accessible for direct human use. Every 15 seconds a child dies from a water-related disease. 88% of all diseases are caused by unsafe drinking water, inadequate sanitation, and poor hygiene.³

Have you ever *really* been thirsty? I haven't. Do we even know what thirst feels like? We know we need our eight glasses of water per day. Some of us are obsessed with being hydrated. We walk around with our water bottles everywhere we go (like me, but at least I try to recycle all of my bottles). We don't know what it's like to be dependent upon water. For many, our living water might be a beer or cappuccino or our favorite carbonated beverage. Listen to the words of this ad: "Thirst is harder to satisfy – really satisfy – than most anything else in the world. You can slake it for the moment with most any wet thing, but just when you think it's all

² Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin: "If I had a water thirst," replied Sancho, "there are wells on the road where I could have quenched it." Miquel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547-1616), *Don Quixote*.

³ Statistics found at: www.water.org.

right it bobs up serenely again with a cry for more. Water, soft drinks, alcoholic drinks, sweet drinks, sour drinks – none of them quite does the work. There’s just one thing that we know of that actually will quench a tantalizing thirst and that is Coca-Cola: The Satisfactory Beverage.” This was a Coke ad in 1908.

What does it mean to really thirst? If we don’t understand thirst or being daily dependent upon water, I wonder if it’s really possible to enter fully into the world of this text. It seems to me that our inability to know what physical thirst feels like hinders us from recognizing the deeper *soul-thirst* we all have. That’s why mystics and monks often *fast* – intentionally give up food and drink for a period of time – in order for their bodies to reflect and connect with a deep, interior hunger that food will never provide and a thirst that all the water in the world will never slake. *Sometimes our trips to the well are really only masking our real thirsts.* In our society where we are cursed with so much and think we have everything we need, it’s difficult for us even to admit that we lack anything, that we need anything or need anyone, that we really need a community of faith – that we even need God.

Unless we come to terms with what we lack and acknowledge our need, unless we see just how parched we are, how can there really be any need for the “living water” Jesus offers? What more can he give us than we already have? Perhaps the critical question is this: *what will it take to leave your jug at the well?*

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs

Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Catonsville, Maryland