

Seeking: Will You Give Me a Drink?

The Samaritan Woman at the Well

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
March 12, 2023

Following the three-year cycle of assigned lectionary scripture readings, it was March 12, 2020 when I last preached on this story from the Gospel of John, known as The Samaritan Woman at the Well. I'll never forget that date. Not because of the sermon, but because I delivered it to an empty sanctuary. That is the date College Hill, and basically every place in the entire country, shut down due to the spreading effects of the COVID-19 coronavirus.

I stated in that sermon three years ago, "The Session of the church deemed it wise to take the appropriate precautionary measures to cancel **all church activities for the next two weeks**, including next Sunday. We will reassess at that point." As we all remember, our time away from in-person activities turned into over a year and a half, followed by on-and-off again in-person gatherings and masking for another year after that. **Needless to say, these past three years have been a time of transformation, flexibility, patience, exploration, adjustment, seeking, and beginning again.**

Today, we continue our exploration of the theme of seeking with another story from the Gospel of John. So far during this season of Lent, we have explored the questions, "Who do you listen to?" and "How do we begin again?" Today, we ask, "Will you give me a drink?" Using this story from John, and the Exodus story of Moses striking the rock to get water to the complaining Israelites wandering in the wilderness, the resource material from A Sanctified Art makes the connection to seeking this way.

Jesus crosses cultural, religious, and societal boundaries by leading his disciples through Samaria. In the heat of midday, he seeks out connection with a Samaritan woman drawing water from the well. His command to her is also a question and an invitation to a new way of life: Will you give me a drink? For the woman, to respond is risky but life-changing. This question creates a dialogue between them in which Jesus sees the woman fully; she leaves the well transformed.

In the wilderness, the Israelites essentially ask: Will you give us a drink, God? Will you take care of us, even now? In their discomfort and fatigue, they question Moses and God. This week, we might imagine ourselves at the well or in the wilderness. **Are we willing to care for our neighbors, seeking to not just quench thirst, but to find living waters that sustain us all? In this season, what are you thirsting for? In what ways are you needing sustenance [in the parched places of your soul]?**

To put it most simply, both scripture readings are **a reflection upon human need, God's grace, and transformation. It's also about interdependence and mutuality.** While both stories make a connection with actual **physical thirst**, they both reveal a deeper meaning concerning **spiritual thirst**. On a very deep level, I would suspect that we are *all* spiritually thirsty.

Interestingly, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is the longest recorded dialogue between Jesus and anyone else in the Bible. And shockingly, it's a conversation between a Jewish, male, religious leader, and an unnamed, marginalized, woman, from a socially and religiously despised people, the Samaritans. And by virtue of the detail of the woman coming to the well by herself, and at noontime during the heat of the day, it reveals she is ostracized by her own people – otherwise she would come with other women early in the day when it was cooler, as was the common practice.

In our day and time we miss, unfortunately, the radical extent of what a scandalous story this was to those first readers of John's gospel. In essence, this is a bridge-building story. Or, as John Pavlovitz would phrase it, this is about building a bigger table where all are welcome. As previously mentioned, this text is primarily about transformation, starting with how **Jesus violates the accepted traditional norms and expectations for social and religious behavior. He does this by challenging the status quo.** I love when the Jesus does that, especially when it challenges our own long-held thoughts and practices.

Jesus' request of the Samaritan woman, "Give me a drink," was a very serious violation. Jews, in general, would not drink out of a Samaritan cup because they considered all Samaritans to be unclean. Therefore, anything they touched would be unclean. Also, it was improper for a man (especially a rabbi) to initiate a conversation with any 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. The status quo, business as usual, was intentionally violated and challenged by Jesus. **His actions were meant to break down the traditional, socially acceptable prejudices and dividing lines between males and females, between people of opposing nationalities, social status, and of differing religious beliefs.** This, in and of itself, makes this story very relevant in our own day and age, for **there is always a critical need to challenge the status quo of deeply engrained systemic prejudice and inequality both in church and society.**

As the people of God, and as followers of Jesus, **we are called to violate the status quo in our own time and place of perceived superiority and entitlement, as well as privilege reserved just for some that is part of life in America.**

With that, let's now get to the heart of the matter in this story: the issue of water. Jesus, after requesting a drink of water, speaks to the woman about "living water." Like in our gospel story last Sunday from John 3, when the Pharisee Nicodemus misunderstands when he was told about being born again, or from above, or anew, 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 therefore our need to dig deeper and seek out more information.** That's a primary focus of our church school classes.

Importantly, the phrase, "**living water,**" can also mean on a literal level in the Greek, "**running water,**" as in a stream, or from an upwelling spring. This water is fresh, available, and easily accessible. **As a metaphor, living water represents God's love, grace, and Sacred Presence in our lives. It flows freely, is readily available, and has the power to transform lives.**

Clear flowing spring water, again on a literal level, is meant to contrast with the kind of water that is found in a well. **Well water,** as opposed to spring water, is stagnant and confined, often filled with impurities, and it takes a lot of effort to make it available. So, for example, **experiencing a new progressive approach to understanding scripture, theology, and the role of the church has been for most of us like the living water of a fresh flowing**

spring. And many of us now see the traditional orthodox approach to Christianity, and many of its doctrines and dogmas, as outdated, confining, and often like the stagnant waters found in a well. I don't mean that as fighting words, but simply as a reflection of a reality that a growing number of people experience, and also a reason why so many are leaving organized, institutional religion.

Getting back to our story, the Samaritan woman 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 exactly what Jesus has to offer, **she understands that he offers something that she needs.** She becomes, using a common modern term, **a seeker!** Seekers somehow know that God has something to offer that they need. Lots of these folks self-identify as 'spiritual but not religious.' We, as a congregation, must constantly address this issue of **how to reach these seekers, especially those who have realized the nurturing benefits of a sense of belonging that comes with participating in and with a community of faith.** We might state it all this way:

- How do we quench our thirst, our seeking?
- How do we quench the thirst, the seeking of our neighbor?

The Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman, part of the resource team, writes of the Samaritan women (and something we can also apply to ourselves):

She needs to not be defined by the worst parts of her life, the number of her husbands, or others' assumptions, but to be seen through the lens of mutual need—to be seen as one of the first witnesses of the Messiah, and now a vessel of living water herself.

Notice that there is an interdependence and mutuality between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Remember, Jesus too needed a drink because he was tired from his journey. We are to see ourselves and others as interdependent. And since all people are children of God, we must approach others with a sense of mutuality. In that process, "What does it look like for you to cross divides in order to connect with someone? What can this connection look like through the lens of mutual need? Yes, it takes courage to cross boundaries and offer a drink to those society may separate from us. Or, to receive a drink offered to us.

Ultimately, **God is the source of living water. It is in our response to this gift, in and through how we live our lives and interact with others, that we share a cup of that water with others. We need God. We need each other.** This requires not only being generous and charitable, but also being vulnerable. Resource biblical commentator, the Rev. Danielle Shroyer, summarizes it all this way:

The question for us this Lent is not only whether we would extend a drink; it's whether we will be brave enough to ask God for one when we need it.

Amen.

Resources:

"Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith", A Sanctified Art Sermon Planning Guide, 2023.