

# LENT: A Time to Fill Your Cup

## Part 3: The Cup 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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With this Lenten season's theme, "A Time to Fill Your Cup," there is no better story in the Bible to illustrate this than the tale known as The Woman at the Well from the Gospel of John. There is a wealth of theological issues to explore, as well as the need to compare and contrast it – which is the author's intent – with the previous story in this gospel, the one we looked at last Sunday, the Pharisee Nicodemus' nighttime visit to Jesus.

This morning, however, I'm going to focus on just two issues that fit the theme of filling our cup. To put it most simply, this story is a reflection upon human need, God's grace, and transformation. It's a story that at first seems to be about actual physical thirst, but then reveals its deeper meaning concerning **spiritual thirst**. On a very deep level, I would suspect that we are *all* spiritually thirsty.

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 a despised people, both socially and religiously, 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, reveals she is ostracized by her own people. 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.

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. First of all, Jesus' request of the Samaritan woman, "Give me a drink," was a very serious violation of both social and religious customs of their day. 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. Secondly, it was improper for a man (especially a rabbi) to talk to 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 as a way to break down the traditional, socially acceptable prejudices and dividing lines between males and females, between people of opposing nationalities, 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. And

like in this story, **it especially includes today the issues of male privilege, white privilege, and Christian privilege.**

As the people of God, and in particular as followers of Jesus, **we are called to violate the status quo of perceived superiority and entitlement that is part of life in America.** And we are to do so with courage and resolve, regardless of the shock and protest of many folks who represent certain traditional elements of church and society, and especially of those who hold on so tightly to what many of us now consider prejudicial practices and attitudes. But lets also turn that back on ourselves for a moment. Perhaps we are not completely innocent when it comes to our own sense of entitlement, including (for most of us) our hard-to-admit sense of white privilege or economic privilege. **Jesus' efforts to question and violate the status quo, therefore, should be a call to action for us. Doing so is a way to help fill our cup.**

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 own need to learn more and dig deeper.** That's the primary focus of our church school classes.

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.** Most importantly, 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 as outdated, confining, and 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.**

This reality was reflected just this past week when about 550 Presbyterians gathered in Kansas City for the annual **NEXT Church** National Gathering. It was a week of discerning where God is leading the church in the new and evolving context in which we live. It's about **believing the church of the future will be more relational, more diverse, more collaborative, more hopeful and more agile.** It's about the revitalization, the re-formation, and the necessary transformation that must take place for organized religion to become relevant again to a greater number of people in today's culture. **It's about the Church filling its cup.** I wish I had been there!

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! We currently live in a time in which countless numbers of people are seeking something to

enhance and bring greater meaning to their lives. **And though many people are increasingly leery about organized religion (and understandably so), they 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 being part of a *community* of faith. The answer for College Hill comes, in part, in **offering an alternative to traditional Christian orthodox belief. This is just one element of the living water offered by God.** It is our goal to be 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, without imposing a sense of guilt and shame – something the Church is good at. So know that **wherever you are from, whatever you believe, you are welcome, as you are!** Yet like the woman at the well (you knew there was going to be a 'yet' didn't you), it is also our intention and hope to be transformed into a loving and compassionate people with a passion for social justice.

With a thousand more things that can and should be said about this remarkable story, I want to make the following proclamation. (This is the 'heresy' part, and follows a more Celtic understanding (rather than Roman) of Christianity.) **By virtue of the belief that the Sacred Presence of God *already dwells within us, and is a part of who we are from our very creation, it is my deep understanding that each of us already has access to this "living water."* It's not a matter, therefore, of receiving something from without, but rather digging deep within ourselves to let that living water of God's Sacred Presence run freely. But perhaps that living water is being held back by a dam of some kind, either by our own or society's making.**

The Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes, who has a blog called [unfoldinglight.net](http://unfoldinglight.net) summarizes and makes applicable this biblical story like this:

Jesus he sees her—her, not people's judgment of her.  
He sees her as she is, and accepts her without judgment:  
she is not immoral; she has been used.  
He sees her wound. And he sees the truth in her.  
He sees her not as someone flawed,  
but someone gifted.

He talks theology with her,  
longer than with anybody else in the Gospels.

Then she leaves her water jug,  
not out of forgetfulness but because she knows she's coming back.  
She goes into the village,  
and the former outcast becomes the first Christian evangelist.  
She brings people to Jesus.

Something happened in her that changed her.  
What was it?

Imagine this: Jesus comes to you  
in the dull midday heat of your ordinary life.  
You are bound by judgments of how good you are.

And he sees through that. Sees you. You. Your soul.  
He sees your wounds, sees your giftedness.  
He sees how your wounds inhibit your gifts...  
and yet can propel your gifts.  
And in his knowing he sets you free.

Leave your water jug.  
What is the news in you to tell?  
What will you do? How will you tell it?

This living water is not meant to be kept confined and stagnant, like well water. Rather, it is to be like accessible, never-ending fresh spring water that flows out freely, filling our cup. Why? Because **ultimately God is the source, not us! And it is in our response to this gift, in and through how we live our lives, that we share a cup of that water with others.**

Amen.