

Are You Thirsty?

The Samaritan Woman at the Well

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

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The story you have just heard, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, is so long and contains so many themes of theological importance that it's hard for any preacher to decide what to focus upon in one 15-minute sermon. To do this passage justice, it would take hours. Therefore, I'm going to focus on just two. First, we'll look at how Jesus challenges the social and religious norms of his day, and we'll explore how we can do the same. And second, we'll try to unpack the meaning of the metaphor "living water," and explore how that can lead to a transformation in our own lives.

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 about **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, the Samaritans. In our day and time we miss, unfortunately, the extent of what an incredibly 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 transforms traditional social and religious conventions and expectations. He does this by challenging the status quo.** I love when the Jesus does that, especially when it challenges our own long-held traditional thoughts and practices.

First of all, Jesus' request of the Samaritan woman, "Give me a drink," was a very serious violation of the social and religious customs of their day. Jews 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 was indeed severely challenged by Jesus. As mentioned, **Jesus acts intentionally 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, where there is still inequality between the genders, between people who are not "from here," and with those who don't believe what we believe.

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

challenged, transformed, even overturned. **What current socially acceptable barriers and dividing lines that alienate people are we, as the people of God and followers of Jesus, called to break through and tear down, regardless of the shock and protest of many folks who represent the traditional elements of church and society, those who hold on so tight and fast to what many of us consider prejudicial practices and attitudes?**

But lets also turn that back on ourselves, casting ourselves in the role of the Samaritan woman, rather than Jesus. What rules, traditions, customs or conventions might Jesus have to cross and disregard in order to speak to us, you and me? What lines is he stepping across in order to speak about what truly matters, and what may transform our lives? Perhaps it involves our own sense of entitlement, including (for most of us) our hard-to-admit sense of white privilege or economic privilege.

Let's 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 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.**

The phrase, "**living water,**" can also mean on a literal level "**running water,**" as in a stream, or from an upwelling spring. Most importantly, its water is fresh, easily accessible, and always available. As a metaphor, **living water represents God's love, grace and presence in our lives, and that it flows freely and is always available. It is in the recognition that God loves and blesses you and I that our lives are transformed.**

Clear flowing spring water, 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.** Those of us on the progressive side of the theological spectrum have experienced this new approach to understanding scripture, theology, and the role of the church as being 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 of a well. In all seriousness, I don't mean that as fighting words, but simply as a reflection of a reality that many progressives, including myself, experience.**

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.** We, as a congregation, must constantly address this issue of how to reach these seekers. The answer for College Hill comes, in part, in offering an alternative to traditional orthodox belief. 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. So know that you are welcome, as you are!**

I am aware that I will now be skipping over large and important portions of this biblical story in order to bring this sermon to a close in a timely manner. So let me jump to the final scene of this story and briefly reflect upon the Samaritan woman's response to what she has learned and experienced from her encounter with Jesus. It may indeed be instructive of our own encounters with the Divine.

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. This unnamed marginalized woman becomes, in effect, the first female evangelist in the Gospel of John. She brings them out to meet Jesus for themselves, and the result is that many more lives were transformed.

This story ends, as will I, with a powerful lesson about evangelism. The Samaritan woman is far from what most would consider an ideal candidate for evangelism, of sharing the good news of God's love and grace. When this story begins she is an outsider, but by the end she becomes a very effective witness. **Her effectiveness comes because she sticks to what she knows and understands by personal experience. She tells the people what God, through Jesus, has done for her – not what organized religion tells her to say.**

Now, I'm aware that sharing a personal testimony is suspect among many (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. Because of that, the townspeople listen and respond positively to her message, which has the effect of transforming the entire community.

Herein, then, lies our challenge, and something for you to think about this week. **How can you (and we together as a congregation) bear witness to what you know and understand, revealing to others how you have been transformed, and then inviting them to "come and see" for themselves?**

It is my belief that we are each filled with "living water," water that is not meant to be kept confined and stagnant, like well water. Rather, it is like spring water that flows out freely, is easily accessible and is never ending. Why? Because God is the source!

It is in and through how we live our lives, then, that we share a cup of *that* water with others.

Amen.