

“JESUS – THE LIVING WATER”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Third Sunday of Lent

John 4:5-42

A number of years ago, in 2008 to be exact, the Chicago marathon took place on a really hot day. Temperatures soared to the upper 80’s, which, from what I’m told, is pretty hot for marathon running. As a result, something interesting and potentially tragic happened. If you’ve ever witnessed a marathon or any other kind of running event, you know that there are water stations along the route, where runners can get a bit of relief. Well, that day, the first wave of runners used so much of the water – not only drinking it, but pouring some of it over their heads – that when the runners in the middle to the end of the race reached the water stations, the water was gone!

In spite of that, they kept on running, but after several miles, dehydration began to set in. Some runners got cramps, some actually collapsed onto the roadway. More than 200 runners were taken to the hospital, and sadly, one actually died. The writer, whose account of this event I read, said that “The runners who stayed in the race slowed their pace, many of them simply shuffling and stumbling their way along the course.” (On-line, “Living Water,” Gregory Knox Jones, 2/24/08)

He maintains, and I agree, that the image of people thirsting and “simply shuffling and stumbling their way,” describes a lot of people in our world today. Their thirsts are not being quenched, and they’re wandering through life, in many ways, lost.

Such was the case with the woman in this morning’s Gospel lesson. We know her story well – we’ve studied it together many times over the years. But it is the kind of story we need to study over and over again because, in many ways, her story is our story as well.

Let’s go back again to that moment on a miserably hot and dry day in Samaria. The scripture tells us that it was about noon, which, as you know, is when the sun shines its brightest. Jesus had been traveling with his disciples, and he stops to rest. The disciples left him to go and buy food. So Jesus is there, sitting by the well, Jacob’s well, getting some well-deserved rest, and no doubt, he is hungry and thirsty. The problem is that he has no bucket and no ladle with which to draw water. So he waits.

And here comes a woman, all by herself. You need to know that right away there's something wrong with this picture. No one came to the well in the heat of the noonday sun – no one, because it made no sense – kind of like running a marathon with no water. You just didn't do it. You came to draw water from the well in the center of the town either first thing in the morning before the sun started beating down – or last thing at night, after the sun had gone down. It was miserable enough to have to walk some distance from your home to even get water – imagine hauling a heavy bucket filled with water through dusty streets who knows how far to your home – trying desperately not to spill a drop.

Yet, here comes this woman. Now, if you have studied this passage before you know that there are all sorts of thoughts about this woman and her history. As Jesus talks with her, we learn that she has been married five times and the man with whom she is currently living is not her husband. Over the years, that has led to this woman being characterized as a “woman with a past” or a “woman with a reputation.” The inference has been that she came to the well at noon so that she wouldn't have to endure the gossip, the finger-pointing, the mocking at the hands of the “good” people of the town.

And that well may have been the case. But let's, for a moment, consider some other possibilities. Maybe hers wasn't a “shady” past. Maybe it was that her five husbands simply died. Women married very young back then, and it is conceivable that she outlived five husbands. People didn't live as long back then, and the men could have died for any number of reasons – so it is conceivable that there was nothing “shady” about her – she might simply have endured the unbearable sadness of losing five husbands to death. And the comment Jesus made about the man she was currently living with – that could have been a relative of one of her husbands that died – in that day and age, the custom was that the husband's family would take in the widow after her husband's death and care for her the rest of her life.

So, you see, we don't really know the back story on this woman. Maybe then, the reason she came to the well at noon was altogether different than we've thought. Maybe, it wasn't about the other people and their thoughts about her, maybe it was her and her own thoughts. Maybe it was too painful for her to come in the morning, and see all those happy women with their husbands by their sides, and their happy families tagging along. Maybe it was too painful for her, when she looked at all of them, to be reminded of how much she'd lost over the years. (If you've ever been in either of those situations, which I know some of us have, you know what she was thinking.) And finally, maybe she was tired of being looked on with pity, as being identified one too many times, as “that poor woman.”

For whatever reason, she came to the well in the noonday sun, thirsty in so many ways. And there she met a man who was thirsty – his name was Jesus. They began to talk. Interestingly, this conversation between Jesus and the woman is the longest conversation He had with anyone in the Gospels. And it is an interesting

conversation, to be sure. Interesting, first of all, because it never should have happened.

It shouldn't have happened because Jews and Samaritans didn't interact – they were enemies – they did their best to avoid each other. Secondly, it shouldn't have happened because Jewish men didn't speak to women unless their husbands were with them.

Yet it happened, and it wasn't, as you heard, all kindness and compassion. It was a good, back and forth, give and take, conversation – not one person looking down on another – but a conversation between equals – each respecting the other's right to talk.

It took a little while for the woman to figure out what was going on. She started out dealing with the obvious – his desire for a drink of water. But the conversation quickly turned. She addressed the issue of inappropriateness – the fact that this wasn't normal. And that was all Jesus needed to open up the door for her – to seeing that this wasn't about physical thirst at all, but a far deeper thirst.

You see, Jesus knew this woman was dying of thirst in so many ways. She was thirsty for love, for respect, for kindness, for friendship. She was thirsty for simple companionship, for someone to actually spend time with her, and listen to her. She was dying of thirst, and Jesus knew it.

It's hard to imagine the impact it had on this woman to realize that Jesus really got her – he really understood her – through and through. He knew the things with which she was struggling, when no one else did, or at least, never cared about. He knew her heart, her soul, her struggle, her thirst.

And He offered her the answer she desperately needed – Living Water. The living water of life – overwhelming love and acceptance, sustenance to face life with hope and courage, grace for forgiveness of sins, companionship on the journey into a full and abundant life. That's what Jesus offered her – and that's what she accepted – Jesus, the Living Water- and she was never the same again. The scripture tells us that she went from that place telling everyone she could about Jesus, and the Living Water He could be for them. And, did you notice, one little line that was stuck in there – she left her bucket behind. How symbolic is that – she left the emptiness behind, and went forward into a new and full life, with the Living Water of Jesus' love flowing over her.

Now, I don't know what you're feeling as you hear this woman's story again this morning, but I'm pretty sure that some of you have come here this morning pretty thirsty as well. That woman could be any one of us, because at one time or another in our lives, all of us have been thirsty – thirsty for love, thirsty for friendship or forgiveness or companionship, thirsty for meaning in our lives – so many reasons.

Sometimes, just life itself, our normal lives, leave us thirsty, empty. One writer put it this way: “The wells from which we have been drinking lose their luster, and we realize that they give only water that satisfies for a time. We have been chasing the whirlwind, as Ecclesiastes said. We have been seeking salvation in a bottle or a needle or an affair or a job or the esteem of our community, or any of a thousand other things, and none of them have satisfied. They have left us empty, yearning for something more, but not knowing quite where to find it,” he concludes. (On-line, “He Gets Me!,” Dr. David Sapp, 3/27/11)

And when all those things with which we fill up our days leave us empty, we are dry with thirst, and don’t know what to do. And yet, the answer is right in front of us, not just in this morning’s lesson, but always. It’s right in front of us.

Booker T. Washington was fond of telling the story about the boat that was sailing in the salty waters of the southern Atlantic Ocean that suddenly signaled for help to a vessel not far away from them. “Help!” they signaled, “Save us, or we perish for lack of water!” The captain of the other vessel signaled back – “Cast down your buckets where you are.” Thinking the other captain hadn’t understood their initial message, the troubled ship’s captain messaged again, “Help! Save us, or we perish from lack of water!” Again the captain of the other vessel messaged, “Cast down your buckets where you are!” This exchange went on for a while, until, in desperation, the captain of the troubled ship gave the command to follow this outlandish advice. When the crew members cast down their buckets, they drew up clear, cool, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River. They had not realized that the powerful currents carried fresh water from the Amazon out into the waters of the Atlantic Ocean. In other words, they were right in the midst of the help they so desperately needed, and didn’t even know it. (On-line, “Deep Well, No Bucket?”, Rev. Alyce McKenzie, 3/14/14)

And so was that woman on that hot, dusty day in Samaria. She was so desperately thirsty for so much in her life, she so desperately needed water, and she was right in the midst of it, and didn’t even know it.

Friends, we don’t need to make that same mistake. If you, for whatever reason, are thirsty today, come to the Living Water, right here, right now. Jesus is here for you. Let His Living Water flow over you and in you and through you. Let Him fill the holes in your soul, the emptiness, the searching. Let Him be the balm for your insecurities and uncertainties. Let Him give you peace. All you have to do is accept the gift of Living Water He wants to give you. All you have to do is say “Yes.”

I want to close with a powerful image shared by the great preacher James Moore. He reminds us of one of the closing scenes in the musical about Jesus called “Godspell.” The scene is of Jesus with his disciples, who in the play, have their faces painted, with clown-like make-up. In this scene, in the Upper Room, Jesus goes to each one of them carrying a bucket of water, and a cloth, and in turn, He washes each of their faces, taking off the layer of makeup under which they’d been

hiding. Then he takes a mirror, and holds it in front of their faces, to let them see who they really are. And then he hugs them. (James W. Moore, *If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Picture is On It*, p. 52)

As Jesus said to those disciples, so He says to you and me, “You don’t have to hide. You don’t have to thirst anymore. The water that I give will become in you a spring of water gushing to life, life here, life now, life real and abundant and full, life eternal.”

Friends, it’s there for the asking. Jesus, the Living Water, is here to quench every thirst you have. Let Him fill your cup to overflowing!

Let us pray.

O Lord our God, we give you thanks that you sent your Son Jesus, the Living Water, into our world, and that He gets us, He knows us through and through. You know, O God, that some of us right here this morning are thirsty. Some are thirsty because of loneliness or sadness; some are thirsty because nothing seems to be going well in their lives; some are thirsty because the things in which they have sought meaning and purpose have come up empty; some are thirsty because they’re tired of being looked on with pity because they’re sick or wounded or had so many bad things happen; and some are thirsty because they get up day in and day out and wonder what it’s all about. For whatever reason the thirst, O God, we pray that you will give to those who thirst right now, this very minute, the courage to ask Jesus to take that thirst away – to let His Living Water into their lives. O God, give them the courage to reach out and say, “Fill my cup, Lord, I lift it up, Lord, come and quench this thirsting in my soul.” May it be so.

Amen.