



“Living Water”
Scripture – John 4:5-29
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, March 15, 2020

I hope today’s scripture reading sketched a scene in your mind. I would like to see if I can add a little color to it.

Jesus was fatigued and thirsty from his journey so he plopped down next to a well. The sun is directly overhead and the disciples of Jesus have left Jesus alone while they search for lunch. While Jesus is sitting there, a woman approaches to draw water, and as she does, Jesus requests a drink. Just like that, Jesus breaks two social conventions. Jews do not speak to Samaritans and Jewish men do not speak to unknown women.

The Samaritan woman responds, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” The narrator of the story reminds his readers that “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.” That is putting it politely. What would have been more accurate was if the narrator had said, “Jews and Samaritans cannot stand the sight of each other!”

The bad blood between Jews and Samaritans could be traced back over 700 years before the time of Jesus. However, this intense rivalry went from bad to worse about 200 years before Jesus stepped into Samaria. The Samaritans built a shrine on Mount Gerizim and declared that this shrine, not the Jerusalem Temple, was the proper place of worship. Angry words and accusations were hurled back and forth for decades until Jewish troops marched to Mount Gerizim and destroyed the shrine. Not only that, but for generations, Samaritans had intermarried with Gentiles and had picked up a few pagan rituals. To good Jews, the Samaritans were irredeemable adversaries.

So, when Jesus asks the woman for a drink, she is stunned. She cannot believe Jesus is asking such a thing. But Jesus replies, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Would you give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

As readers, we know this conversation is occurring on two levels. Jesus is not talking about plain drinking water. He’s driving at something deeper. The woman is not entirely sure what Jesus means, so she says, “Where do you get that living water?”

Jesus goes esoteric on her and says, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” Heavy stuff.

In my mind, I picture the woman looking baffled for a few seconds. I can almost see the wheels in her mind turning as she attempts to decipher what Jesus is talking about, and as the conversation continues, she has a dawning awareness that Jesus is a prophet; maybe even the Messiah.

As she is trying to absorb all of this, the disciples show up. The woman dashes back to her town to share the news that she believes she may have met the Messiah. One can only imagine her thrill and the commotion she caused! However, there is something else in the text that catches my attention. Why did the writer of this story include the detail that she left her water jar behind? Was it because she was so overwhelmed by the encounter with Jesus that nothing else mattered, so she simply forgot it? Perhaps. Jesus obviously sent her head spinning.

The text says that she left the jar and ran off as soon as the disciples appeared and began questioning Jesus. Their questions expose the disciples as typical first century men who did not respect women. When the disciples approach the well and discover Jesus conversing with a Samaritan woman they do not burst into a rant about Jesus talking with a Samaritan – the enemy! Instead, they are “astonished that he was speaking with a *woman*.” Notice also, that the disciples did not speak to her. Were they being dismissive by not even recognizing her presence? I suspect most of us have been in a situation where someone did not acknowledge our presence and it made us feel small and unworthy of their attention.

There is a whole sermon right there in the attitude of Jesus toward women. We can find other examples of Jesus breaking with his culture’s sentiment that women are second class citizens. One quick example is when Jesus is in the home of Mary and Martha. He praises Mary for doing only what a man in that society was supposed to do. Sit at the feet of a rabbi and absorb his wisdom.

As I was perusing various books and commentaries on this passage I discovered something I had not known. One theologian said that in first century Palestine there were “Pharisees who were called ‘the bruised and bleeding Pharisees’ because they [were so dismissive of women, that they] shut their eyes when they saw a woman on the street and so they walked into walls and houses!”¹ Serves them right! I just love it when a foul behavior is immediately met with a bit of justice. Our world would be a far better place if every time we veered from Christ-like behavior we ploughed head first into a wall!

There is little doubt that part of the message of this passage is how Jesus treated women and outsiders with respect. However, as the conversation between Jesus and this woman unfolded, we can see that the intent of Jesus was to focus on what he calls “living water.” What do you suppose he meant by that term?

As I have said before, Jesus was constantly using metaphorical language to arouse interest and to leave a memorable impression. His use of metaphors also teased the brain into seeing more than one layer of meaning. In the Gospel of John, we find that Jesus was fond of drawing people closer and goading them to take a deeper dive into life, by using words with double meanings.

Last Sunday we focused on the story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus under the cover of darkness because he could glimpse the Spirit of God in him. Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again and Nicodemus wondered how a person could reenter his mother’s womb. We, the readers, know that Jesus was really talking about a spiritual rebirth.

On another occasion when Jesus talked about bread, we know that he was not simply talking about the bread we eat for physical nourishment, but rather the bread of heaven that feeds our souls. In today’s passage, Jesus does something similar, except that his topic is water.

Today, many have deep thirsts within that are not being quenched. They bring their bucket to the well named “pleasure” and they take a gulp, but it does not quench their thirst. So they trot over to the well named “wealth”

and dip their bucket in, but it, too, provides only temporary relief. They scamper to the well named “entertainment” which provides a momentary distraction from the things for which they truly thirst. But all the while, they are shriveling up inside.

The Samaritan woman at the well was so parched and dry within – her soul so shriveled – that she may have grown cynical and despairing like so many people today. However, she had not abandoned all hope, because when Jesus spoke of *living water*, she was aroused to new possibilities.

The living water that Jesus gives her is overwhelming love that embraces her and accepts her and heals her. But the life-giving water is not for her alone. God’s love is never for us alone. It’s always meant to spill beyond us so that it flows into the lake of humanity. It is meant to be shared with others and to remind us that we all swim in the same sea.

Living water is the life-giving Spirit of God that assures us that we are loved and forgiven, and reconciled to our Creator. Living water quenches our thirst for meaning and purpose.

A colleague shares the story of Louisa Hulett. Dr. Hulett is a political science professor who was raised in the church, but when she went to college she fell away from the church – and stayed away. Hulett said, “I was a prodigal child who wandered to a distant land far from God. I had no time for God. I was busy with my life and preoccupied with career advancement. Hanging on to a passing acquaintance with a blurry, generic God, I attended church until college. But my weak and passive faith was no match for the skepticism, intellectual arrogance, and self-gratifying life style I embraced in collage. After collage, I studied hard, earned my PhD (my first idol) and started teaching international relations...I wrote several articles and books (publications were my second idol) and was well received in the classroom.... I earned tenure (my third idol) and received the acclaim of being a big fish in a small pond. I controlled my fate, or so I thought.

My other passion was sports... I loved to win... As a successful person, I could live the way I wanted to... Despite this great life, however, I began to feel that something was missing. Career and sports were not enough. I still hated to lose, but winning and succeeding offered no joy... I was questioning the value of life. What was my purpose in life? Why was there a universe?... I began to do some serious soul-searching. I realized that I was very far from God and was missing out on something.”²

Living water quenches the deep thirsts we experience. Living water floods us with the love of our Creator. Living water washes away the artificial barriers between us and people we have been taught to distrust. Living water cleanses us from the desire to focus only on ourselves so that we can discover that when we touch the lives of others we find our true self.

Are there areas of your life that are parched and dry? Share a cup with Christ and let him refresh you with living water.

NOTES

1. William Barclay, *Daily Devotions with William Barclay*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 19.
2. Michael Lindvall, “Living Water,” March 19, 2017.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

After speaking with Jesus, the Samaritan woman rushed to declare: “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” You, O God, know our stories. You know the pain we carry, and the fear that plagues us. You know the rituals that sustain us, and the hopes to which we cling.

And, still, you meet us in the midst of our daily labors to listen to the desires of our hearts and to bring us good news. So we come, Living Lord, to sit a while at Jacob's Well, to rest in your presence, to draw water that quenches our thirst.

Eternal God, we are overwhelmed by the rapid-fire news on the novel Coronavirus. We are anxious. We are downright scared. Day by day, we are trying to figure out how to be good citizens, good neighbors, good workers, good caretakers, good *disciples* in the midst of this global pandemic. In this season of uncertainty, free us from the impulse to turn inward and attend *only* to our own needs. In these trying times, help us resist the temptation to stoke division and lay blame at the feet of those who are different from us. In the midst of widespread panic, deliver us from paralyzing fear and embolden us to place our trust in you — our Refuge and our Strength.

As we take precautions that keep us separated from one another, we ask that you would bind us together as the Body of Christ and guide us toward new ways of practicing Christian community. Compassionate God, keep us ever-mindful of our neighbors, particularly those who are most vulnerable to this virus and those who will suffer the secondary effects of this crisis. We pray especially for:

those who are sick, and those who are providing care;
those who are grieving the loss of loved ones, and those who are grieving the loss of security;
those who are fearful, because underlying health issues make them especially vulnerable;
those who already struggle with anxiety, for whom times of crisis are particularly overwhelming;
those who are lonely, for whom social distancing only adds to feelings of isolation;
those who feel powerless to keep themselves and their families healthy;
those who have power, and now face hard decisions about keeping communities safe;
those who do not have adequate access to health care, or the benefit of sick leave;
those who will lose much-needed school lunches as districts close;
those whom we carry in our hearts, whose names we lift before you now:

God of Grace, who offers Living Water to quench our thirst, help us always to bear witness to your good news. Even now, *especially* now, may we remember that you send us — the Body of Christ — to echo the Samaritan woman's words: "Come and see!" Wherever we are, may we point others toward Christ, who is the source of our hope.

It is in Christ's name that we pray, and that we offer the words he taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.