

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

John 4:5-42

Sunday, February 24, 2008, Lent III

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One day about 15 years ago, in the middle of a work day, I began to feel very strange, not quite right. One moment I was talking with colleagues and the next I was on the floor, doubled over, unable to catch my breath. I had never felt anything like that in my life. I honestly thought I might die. An ambulance was called and in that moment I began an odyssey that lasted for three months. I was hospitalized 8 times, lost 30 pounds, and finally had surgery. My problem – a run-of-the-mill kidney stone. I was as sick as I was for as long as I was because of the abuses of a managed health care company bent on the bottom line, but that's for another sermon. Well, thank God, I recovered and was determined to take any medicine, do any program, complete any therapy that would prevent this from ever happening again. I consulted a very fancy urologist on 5th Avenue, expecting a very fancy answer. And here is what he said: "Drink more water... lots more water... drink it all day long and do that for the rest of your life." "That's it" I thought? That's the cure? Well, I took the doctor's advice and not only have I never suffered like that again, but my general health improved. Having kidney stone helped me to realize that I was walking around dehydrated without ever knowing it.

Most of us are. Experts tell us that by the time we begin to feel thirsty, we're already dehydrated. And Diet Coke just doesn't cut it. We need water. We are made out of water. We came from the water. We are drawn back to the water. Water is life.

In this story from the Gospel of John, we find a very dehydrated Jesus. He had been on the road with his disciples, traveling north from Judea to Galilee.

And in between the two regions was a place called Samaria. This place was verboten to the pious. You see, it was inhabited by the descendants of those Jews who had inter-married with the invading Babylonians all those centuries before. Not only had they intermarried, they had also accepted the some of the culture and customs of the Babylonians. So, in the eyes of the purists, these Samaritans were half-breeds and full pagans. Religious Jews would regularly walk an extra nine hours around it just to avoid it. But not Jesus and not his disciples. He marched them right into the middle of all that uncleanness.

Jesus seemed to have had a thing about that, didn't he?

About noon, with the sun beating down on his head Jesus began to feel the dramatic affects of thirst. He came to the city of Sychar where Joseph's legendary well was, and he sat down. But without a bucket, and with no one

in sight, he was out of luck. You see, most folks drew their water in the early morning or in the cool of the evening, when the sun was not so harsh. Well, lo and behold, along came a woman to get some water. And Jesus asked her for a drink. This was shocking because respectable religious leaders never spoke to unrelated women in public. In fact, some of the Pharisees known as "The Bruised and Bleeding Pharisees" would close their eyes when they saw a woman on the street, even if it meant walking into a wall. But Jesus not only looked at her, he looked her in the eye and asked for the kindness of a drink of water. Maybe it was the way he looked or his accent or his clothing, but she understood him to be a Jew, and she understood herself to be unclean in his eyes. "Why are you asking me, a Samaritan?" she wanted to know. And Jesus said: "If you knew who it was that was asking you for a drink, you would ask him to give you living water." Well, she didn't know what that was, but it sure sounded better than having to tote those buckets everyday, so she pressed the point and Jesus replied: "Everyone who drinks this well water will be thirsty again. But the water that I give becomes an internal spring, gurgling up to eternal life." And the woman replied: "Give me that water!"

So Jesus told her to go get her husband. And here the woman is commended because instead of being evasive, and perhaps with a little indignation, she

responded: "I don't have a husband" to which Jesus replied, "You're right. But you've had five husbands and the man you have now, you're not married to." So, not only did the Lord travel into a forbidden zone; not only did he talk to an unrelated woman in public, but he talked to one that most folks assumed was fallen. Scholars surmise that perhaps she came to draw water in the middle of the day because none of the vicious gossips would be around. But Jesus didn't care about her reputation. And he didn't care what the town people or his own disciples would think of his talking to her, in public, in the light of day. None of it mattered because not only was he thirsty, but she was thirsty both body and soul.

This is the longest recorded conversation that Jesus had with anyone in any of the four Gospels. For those enmeshed in a patriarchic view of the church, this story should speak volumes. But instead, this woman has often been painted a whore instead of as a disciple and evangelist who ran into town and invited everyone: "Come and see!"

So much of this story will preach. It is so infused with the gospel of liberation that it's hard for this preacher to even know where to begin. But one thing is for certain, this story of Jesus is a powerful affirmation of his radical kind of

ministry. With his simple request for a drink of water from this misunderstood woman, Jesus proclaimed that God's Realm is a realm of inclusion not exclusion, dignity not denigration, empowerment rather than exploitation, and affirmation not marginalization. And shame on the church whenever it has not lived up to its radical Savior. Jesus asked her for a drink and his request provoked a dialogue in which he made it abundantly clear that God doesn't want any human being to shrivel and die from a parched soul. Instead, we're all meant to have that "living water."

But what is this ethereal living water? We might ask with this woman, "Where does it come from and how do I get it?"

The woman was looking for the source outside somewhere. Perhaps she thought that Jesus knew of a magic spring hidden in the countryside where this living water was. We might chuckle at that primitive notion. We don't look for magic springs, but we do look for quick answers in the latest fad or craze or theology or book. We look and we look for that thing that will satisfy us, but we don't find it because we're looking in the wrong place.

Jesus said: "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." This statement is akin to Jesus' teaching that the Kingdom of God is not out there somewhere. The kingdom of God is inside of us. In the same way, the living waters are inside of us, but we do not drink from them because we do not prime the pump, even though we know how.

Jesus met that woman where she was. He accepted her. He loved her. And that started those waters bubbling inside of her. In fact, there was so much water after she met Jesus that she went into town, where those petty gossips lived who had made her life so miserable, and offered them a drink. "Come and see" she said to them. She had been loved and in return, she loved. She had been forgiven, and in return she forgave. He gave the water to her and then she gave it to the whole town! Come and see! And she was not depleted, because living waters never run dry. We can never love so much or forgive so much or share so much that we won't have anything left. Instead, when we live this Jesus way, when we give people a drink of love and forgiveness and generosity, not just once, but over and over again, then we discover that there is water, water, everywhere. Thanks be to God.