

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN – WATER  
John 4:1-26  
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Thomas D. York  
Knox Presbyterian Church  
Cincinnati, Ohio

Jesus said: "The person who believes in me will never thirst." (John 6:35)

I remember once being at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus and I stopped to see their stunning, modern new chapel. The room was empty. The light of mid-morning created shadows and nuances which nearly invited me to be still and sit down. As I did I heard softly, gently, the unmistakable sound of water. It was surprisingly beautiful - that ordinary sound. In that place of brick, wood and slate, with reverence and mystery built into the height, and the angles and architectural relationships, the sound of water was as eloquent as an entire Bach cantata. I knew immediately where it must be coming from. The baptismal font is built into the floor: solid, brick, and it is a pool with an overflow and a bit of a drop to a catch basin. It was designed to make the music for the place: the music of prayer, meditation, music to remind a hurried visitor of a gentle providence, a loving, caring, presence. The sound of water: an elemental reminder of the waters of creation and womb; the soft showers of spring time which call signs of life from a sleeping earth; a reminder of the fragile balance of things, the delicate boundary between life and death; the unfathomable but happy mystery which allows hydrogen and carbon molecules to combine in precise ratios to produce what we must have to live. And the water of baptism, placed gently on young foreheads, symbolizing a love deep and strong enough for all of us.

It is a powerful Biblical symbol. In Israel water was a reminder of humanity's dependence on God's grace. In the Exodus "the lack of water invariably was the occasion for murmuring and doubt." (see Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible). This existence of water in the Promised Land is a sign of God's providence ... it will be "a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs flowing forth in valleys and hills." (Deuteronomy 8:7)

Inevitably water and human need for water became a way to express the divine-human relationship. Human need for God, in the poetry of the Psalmist echoed beautifully:

"As a hart longs for flowing streams  
So longs my soul for thee, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God for the living God." (Psalm 42:1, 2)

Jesus said: "The person who believes in me will never thirst." The story of the Samaritan woman and Jesus at the well is so complex it is rarely pressed into one sermon. As a matter of fact, it is so long and convoluted it is almost never read out loud in its entirety.

It is a story about outcasts, despised minority, people oppressed by centuries of racial and religious prejudice. It is about social arrogance and the barriers people construct between themselves and others. It is also about self hatred, and guilt, and isolation, and alienation. It is about a power which cuts through all of that and makes new. It is about a love that cleanses, reconciles, heals, and makes whole. But most of all, I think, it is a story about thirst.

Jesus and his entourage were traveling from Judea in the south, to Galilee in the north, through Samaria in the middle. To the Romans a Semite was a Semite and the private family arguments between Jews and Samaritans was of no interest. But it was real enough that most Jews would walk a long way to avoid having to go through Samaria. The trouble was 700 years old. It began when Samaritan Jews intermarried with Babylonian immigrants and adopted some of their customs. To "true believers" in Jerusalem Samaritans were ethnically unclean, impure, and theologically compromised. In a time which has seen Holy Wars this situation has a familiar cast to it. Hatred between Jews and Samaritans was real and strong and deep.

The entourage stopped at mid-day, at a well, in Samaria which was associated historically with Jacob. The people with Jesus went to a nearby town to buy food. A woman came to the well to draw water. Now, if you are a first century Jew or Samaritan hearing this story - you're up on the edge of your seat. Because the tale is getting interesting. The woman is from the town. There is a well in the town. Why has she walked a mile and a half to draw water from a well which is 100 feet deep? There is a reason why she cannot use the town well. It will soon emerge. In the meantime Jesus is about to do something unsettling and revolutionary. Rabbis were forbidden to be with, look at, or talk to a woman in public. A Rabbi was not allowed to greet his wife, his daughter, his sister in public. There is an idiomatic figure of speech in the language of the day which translates "bruised and bleeding Pharisees." William Barclay says they are the ones who closed their eyes when they saw a woman and consequently walked into a lot of walls and fell down a lot.

In an act as volatile as Rosa Parks taking a seat in front of the bus after decades of sitting in the back - alone, Jesus asked the woman for a drink. The woman objects, because of the cultural strictures.

Catholic scholar Raymond Brown thinks she is one of the most vivid characters in the New Testament. "...mincing and coy, with a certain light grace." She engages in light repartee with him. Are they both carefully aware that wells are where romance happens? Are they playing, gently, with the word water: with thirst? He offers her living water literally, "running water." (*Gospel of John*, vol. 1, p. 175) Does Jesus know more about wells than Jacob? He corrects her: living water is not running water, but something altogether different. It is what she needs to live.

Now another theme is introduced. "Call your husband," Jesus tells her, and discovers that she has had five husbands. The man she currently lives with is not one of them. The legal limit on husbands in Israel is three. Thus her presence at this deep well, of stale water, a mile and a half out of town, at the hottest hour of the day. She could not use the town well. She was not welcome. She was a pariah: an outcast among outcasts. Refined, respectable people acted as if she didn't exist. Their children snickered at her. Less refined people used hard words, in stage whispers loud enough for her to hear, to describe what she was.

The woman tries to change the subject by bringing up the ancient controversies between Jews and Samaritans. But Jesus won't let her. Now the disciples return with food, the woman returns to the village. The people in the village are very impressed either with what she tells them or with some change in her because, en masse, they come to Jesus. Many believe. And the story ends with Jesus staying in their village for two days.

The fourth Gospel, which we are studying this Lenten season, presents material about Jesus in a manner designed to illustrate who he is, and the nature of the new life he gives. There is a sense in which the whole presentation is an illustration of the rebirth Jesus told Nicodemus about early in the sequence. "You must be born again," Jesus said. Nicodemus inquired as to the meaning of the phrase and this story is one of the explanations.

The woman was reborn, born again - if you will - because she was willing to deal with her emptiness. She received living water because she could say "I'm thirsty." That's exactly what religious types can't say. The Pharisees are portrayed as eminently self-confident, self-assured, almost arrogantly proud of their piety, their hold on religious tradition. Confessing their need did not come easy. Perhaps that's why Jesus spent so much time with poor people, social outcasts, fishermen, prostitutes, tax collectors, and this faded flower at the Samaritan well. He was most comfortable apparently with people who could confess to something less than perfection, people who knew a little about thirst. There is something basic, something absolutely necessary, if our spiritual pilgrimage is to go anywhere, in knowing about and admitting to thirst: something important about identifying the dry places in life: the parched areas that need refreshment and living water.

Culturally, it is an urgent need. Historian Daniel Boorsten notes that the great strides in the human story were always precipitated by an acknowledgment of ignorance. People who know the world is flat don't have to explore it. Dr. Lewis Thomas, popular author and research biologist writes: "The only solid piece of scientific truth about which I feel totally confident is that we are profoundly ignorant about nature. Indeed, I regard this as the major discovery of the past one hundred years of biology ... We are, at last, facing up to it. In earlier times we either pretended to understand how things worked or ignored the problem, or simply made up stories to fill the gaps. Now that we have begun exploring in earnest, doing serious science, we are getting glimpses of how huge the questions are, and how far from being answered." (*The Medusa and the Snail*, p. 58-59)

If our technology is to save us, or at least participate in our ability to sustain life on our planet, it will be because that open-ended questioning, that probing, doubting, that ability to acknowledge thirst has been maintained, preserved and vigorously practiced.

Literature is full of the emptiness of the human spirit. There is something about us it seems that requires more than the dailiness of life provides. Human beings need something which transcends their humanity, gives hope and meaning to the journey, something which calls striving, aspiring, sacrificing out of us. When we are deprived of it, we die. When Willy Loman's American dream crumbles in *Death of a Salesman*, there is nothing left but inevitability and suicide. When God dies - or the idea of God - or faith in God, or hope for God, we die too. There is nothing about us more clear than that. We are created with an empty space, a thirst, so real that I conclude our need for God is the most convincing evidence of God's existence. Augustine wrote it for all the ages - for the Samaritan woman and for us - "Thou hast made our souls restless until they find rest in thee." And the Psalmist - "My soul thirsts for the living God."

That woman's most urgent need was intensely personal. An outcast from a race that was

already despised, a breaker of sacred customs and common morality, she couldn't have 'felt much about herself other than self-loathing, self-rejection, expressed in a 'series of temporary relationships which recently had stopped even pretending respectability. This woman, who knew she didn't matter to anyone, was given new life by a man who, for a few minutes, took her seriously as person. She felt like a nobody - and Jesus reminded her that she was a child of God.

Social commentator Rene Dubos writes that "The most distressing aspect of the modern world is not the gravity of its problems. There have been worse problems in the past. It is the dampening of the human spirit that causes many people, especially in the countries of western civilization, to lose their pride in being human, and to doubt that we will be able to cope with our problems and those of our future." (R. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, p. 18).

What happens to our confidence, our pride in being human, our esteem for ourselves as children of God? Two things: first the global forces which influence our lives seem to be so far above our ability to affect them we feel powerless. And, if we've learned anything recently it is that powerless people begin to feel hopeless and not long after that they get complacent or violent. If the human race doesn't make it, that is to say, it will not be because of the sin of pride, but because we gave up, because we allowed ourselves to be less than human.

The second thing that happens to self esteem is that authority figures or authoritarian structures tell us that we have no reason to experience self esteem because we aren't worth much. Sometimes parents do that to their children. "How can you be so stupid?" is, in actuality, a description of worth which a child absorbs and adopts and frequently lives out. Sometimes teachers do it, and coaches, and scout leaders, and ministers. Religion seems determined to make people feel bad as a way to save them. And given our propensity to believe the worst about ourselves, it doesn't take much to convince us that we are unworthy, that the guilt we feel is legitimate, that the love of God is reserved for those who deserve it and that eliminates us. Unfortunately religion has a way of making us feel guilty about almost anything: about how we live or don't live; about what we find we can affirm and what we can't believe; about how much we don't give; having so much or about not having enough; about loving our children so much, or not loving them enough. And somewhere in that maze of guilt, we lose the reason for raising the subject in the first place, namely that there is a God who forgives and accepts and reconciles, and who desperately wants us to be at home with ourselves and with the good world God has given us: that in the dry desert of guilt, there is water to drink, living water.

The woman came to the well that day because she had no-where else to go. She found living water in the acceptance of a man who took her seriously. She found living water as that man restored her by treating her as God's child. She was born again, given a whole new life by the miracle of a Savior's love. That is Gospel: Good News to any who know their thirst. Thanks be to God. Amen.