

“Thirst Quencher” GPPC 3-19-17
Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:5-42

[Read before the Gospel reading. In John’s gospel, often Jesus will have a conversation with somebody, but the person misunderstands. A person will talk about something, say, water, on an ordinary level. But then Jesus will talk about water on another, higher, metaphorical level that is initially misunderstood. In John’s gospel, Jesus and his conversation partners often talk past each other. That happened last Sunday in John chapter three with Nicodemus and his confusion about being “born again” or being “born from above.” And it happens again, this Sunday in chapter four. Read John 4:5-42]

Several years ago, I went to visit my mother who lives in South Carolina. I spent the night, and the next morning got up to run a few miles before driving back to North Carolina. Unlike some of you who apparently roll out of bed and immediately take off for a ten-mile sprint at 5:00 a.m., I need some time for coffee (first cup administered by bedside I.V.), a light breakfast, and six trips to the bathroom. By then, it’s mid-morning and I’m ready to run.

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So I left my mom's house around ten-something a.m. on a sunny, summer day to run a few miles in the steamy South Carolina countryside. I got back to my mom's after less than an hour, sweating like a pig on a tour of Smithfield Farms. I was dreaming about that first icy, delicious gulp of water. I grabbed the doorknob to go in the house. Locked. Rang the doorbell. No answer. Mama's car was gone. I think she'd gone to the air-conditioned YMCA to work out. I had no key and no cellphone. There were no hoses to drink out of. And I got so thirsty I started to feel a little nervous and light-headed. Getting desperate, finally I walked over to the neighbors' house, people I'd never met before, introduced myself, apologized for my dripping appearance and my, um, fragrance, and asked for a glass of water, which they gladly supplied. They were Christians after all, and it's in the job description, isn't it?

Have you ever been so thirsty you started to feel frantic? Even worse, have you ever been thirsty in the desert?

The writer of Exodus says the Israelites on their 40-year journey in the wilderness camp at Rephidim, but there's no water and they begin to complain. "Nice job, Moses. You bring us out of Egypt just to kill us

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and our children and even the livestock with thirst. Well done!” So Moses complains to God, “What am I going to do with these people? They’re ready to stone me.” But God, who seems awfully calm, says, “Go ahead of the people. Take some leaders with you and that staff I gave you. Remember the one you struck the Nile River with? Yeah. That one. Go on. I’ll be waiting for you, standing on a rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and water will come out for the people to drink.” So Moses goes, whacks the rock, and sure enough, water comes out.

The lesson is clear, isn’t it? When we get thirsty enough, we tend to become grouchy. When we get thirsty enough, no matter how good God has been to us in the past, it’s easy to become forgetful and doubt that God is really with us. Have you ever felt that way?

John says Jesus comes to a Samaritan city called Sychar. Now Jews and Samaritans of the time hate each other; there’s a long-standing feud and different religious understandings. So Jesus, a Jew, is coming into what’s considered enemy territory. But he’s tired and thirsty, and takes a seat beside a famous well, Jacob’s well.

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It's about noon. Probably blazing hot. Most people would come and get their water earlier in the day, before the air became an oven. But there's Jesus by himself. And then there's somebody else—a Samaritan woman who's coming to get some water. Jesus says her, "Give me a drink."

Now this little sentence is actually a big deal because no self-respecting Jewish man would speak to a woman in public, especially not a Samaritan woman. But Jesus loves to break the written and unwritten rules that exclude people and maintain old hatreds.

The Samaritan woman herself knows the rules. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

Jesus comes right back. "Well, if you knew God's gift and who's saying, 'Give me a drink,' you'd have asked him and he would've given you living water."

But this Samaritan woman is relentless. She says, "You don't even have a bucket, and the well's deep. Where're you going to get that living water? You think you're greater than Jacob who gave us the well?"

And Jesus says, “You can drink from this well. You’ll get thirsty again. But if you drink the water I supply, you’ll never be thirsty. The water I give becomes in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

And the woman says, “Great! Give me that water so I won’t be thirsty again and have to keep coming back to draw water.”

But then Jesus surprises us with his answer. “Go, call your husband, and come back.” Why does he say this? We don’t know, but maybe it’s to give us a closer glimpse of the woman and of Jesus.

The woman says, “I don’t have a husband.”

Jesus says, “Right. You’ve had five husbands and the guy you’re with now is not your husband.”

So what’s going on here? Maybe Jesus is engaging in some sort of inquisition or some sort of cross examination and he’s getting ready to declare her guilty. Is that what it is?

No. Notice what happens. The woman says, “Okay. I see you’re a prophet.” The word prophet here doesn’t seem to operate in the way we’re used to. We’re used to prophets as persons called to declare God’s will. But here prophet seems to be used in the sense of someone having

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some sort of divine insight into the lives of others. “You know about me. I see you’re a prophet,” she says.

But then she starts talking about where people worship God—on the mountain (Samaritans) or in Jerusalem (Jews). And what’s she doing? She’s changing the subject. Jesus starts talking about her personal life, and she starts talking about where to worship God.

Nice try.

And how does Jesus respond? He’s already pointed out that the woman has had five husbands and is living with somebody. Has she gotten divorced five times? Has she been abused and fled five abusive husbands? Have five husbands died and she just keeps getting passed down to the next brother with the practice of levirate marriage? Hey, when we talked about this story during the Bible study at the church staff meeting on Tuesday, our Congregational Nurse Janet Dawson wondered whether she had bumped off five husbands. (Watch out for Janet!) We don’t know her circumstances. We don’t know.

But we know what Jesus says about it. Nothing. He doesn’t say another word. He does not condemn her. He does not give her a lecture.

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He just loves her as she is and he moves on to answer her thoughts about worship.

Basically he says, “Worship is less about location and more about the direction of the heart. True worship is concerned with ‘spirit and truth.’ True worship is about folks coming together with sincere hearts hoping to wrestle with the living God and with truth, with reality not spin.”

And the woman says, “I know the Messiah’s coming.”

And Jesus answers, “You’re looking at him.”

Now more happens in the story, but skip to the end and notice what the woman does. She leaves her water jar. Maybe she figures she won’t need it anymore. She leaves her water jar and heads back to the city to tell the people about Jesus.

And she doesn’t exactly have the most polished pitch, “Come see this guy who told me everything I did! He can’t be the Messiah, can he?”

Come check out this man. He can’t be the Messiah, can he?

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You won't find that line on a little Bible tract, will you? A street preacher is not going to holler that at you when you walk by.

“Come see this guy who told me everything I did! He can't be the Messiah, can he?”

But here's the thing. This Samaritan woman, this outsider, this newcomer to faith, becomes the first evangelist in John's gospel. Her halting, but heartfelt question is enough. She tells people about this Jesus who asked her for a drink but then who quenched a thirst she didn't even know she had.

You know Jesus never really says what this living water is that he gives. But maybe we can see it in the stories we read this morning. The Israelites thirsty and angry and frantic in the desert.

And maybe we know people like that, or even we're like that sometimes. When people are in pain or frightened, it's easy to become furious and frenetic. And we are thirsty simply to know (yet again) that God is there and will help us get through whatever we face. We're thirsty to know that, like God told Moses, somebody will stand on the

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rock and show us where to get some water or some food or somebody to listen and help. We're thirsty for that.

Or maybe we're like this Samaritan woman with her five husbands and live-in guy friend. Our lives are not so neat and tidy. And everybody's got an opinion. Maybe that's why the woman came to the well at noon, to avoid the scowls and opinions of religious folks.

But then Jesus comes along and says, "I know you. I know who you are. I know your past. I know your present. I know what you've been through. I know. I know. And I love you. Come have a drink of grace, grace that is a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Maybe we're like that woman. And we don't have a great line, some impressive speech rehearsed to share our faith. But we just say, "I'm not perfect. I make lots of mistakes. But I have faith in God who forgives and who guides and who gives me hope and direction and purpose. And I have this church. It's imperfect. But we laugh and cry and study and work and play and worship together. And it helps get me through the week. And it helps get me through life. And I feel God's presence in that church."

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Come and see this man who told me everything I've ever done. He
can't be the Messiah, can he?

Can he?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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