

Thirsty for Living Water

In the name of him who died for the ungodly, dear friends in Christ: In his telling of the Gospel, the Apostle John reveals his deep insight as a theologian as well as his skill as a master story teller. In the preceding chapter, which we heard from last week, he had Jesus dealing with Nicodemus, a man at the top of the mountain socially, morally, and likely financially. He was a Pharisee and a member of the ruling council of the Jews: a man every Jew would have looked up to and admired almost with a sense of awe.

And now immediately after the record of that exchange, John has Jesus dealing with a person on the exact opposite end of the spectrum: a woman of a race despised by the Jews – the hated Samaritans (a word always spoken with a sneer of contempt). The Jews considered the lot of them to be unclean dogs; their religion a farce, their practices vile, their moral values disgusting. For the Jews, there's nothing worse than a Samaritan. And this isn't just any Samaritan. This woman is a virtual outcast even among her own people. She's despised even by those the Jews despise. And it's a case in which two negatives don't make a positive. No, she is the lowest of the low. And yet Jesus deals with her with precisely the same openness, patience, respect, and kindness that he dealt with Nicodemus. To Jesus both are equally lost sheep that he wants very much to welcome and to include in his fold – which I believe to be John's point in placing these two accounts side by side.

She lives in the village of Sychar. And she has come at midday to the ancient well of Jacob seeking water – one of the most basic necessities of life. That she is here at this hour speaks volumes. We know that Sychar has a stream of water that flows right through the town. There's a handy fountain or pool (maybe more than one) where the women can fill their water jars. In those days it was a woman's task to fetch water for her home; usually once first thing in the morning and then again near sunset. All the ladies did it at the same time. It was an opportunity for them to socialize and to exchange gossip. It's clear that the women of Sychar have told *this* woman that she is not welcome to join them – or even to use their conveniently located watering hole.

Ostracized by them, instead she has to go to Jacob's well located a quarter mile or more out of town to draw her water. This well is used mostly by the shepherds to water the livestock: once in the morning as they are leading their sheep to pasture, and again in the late afternoon when bringing their flocks home. It appears that she's not welcome among them either. That's why she comes here at noon in the heat of the day when there's usually no one else around.

Even empty the large ceramic water jar she carries is heavy. So, when she arrives at the well, she's hot, she's tired, she's thirsty; and far thirstier than she even knows. She has come for water, a basic need; but she's long been thirsty for another need just as basic and essential to humans: the need to love and to be loved, the need to be accepted, to be included, to be forgiven, to find peace and contentment. And she's been looking to satisfy this thirst in all the wrong places. She's long been convinced that if she could just find the right man to be with, then she'll have all these things she's craving. But it hasn't worked out that way, not at all.

We don't know the precise details of her history, but from what we do know we can fill in the blanks with some pretty good guesses. Her first husband was her dream as a teen-ager. She was so happy to hook and land him; but he turned out to be immature and selfish (sort of

like she was). It wasn't going at all well with him, so she set her sights on a fellow who was a bit older and more settled. It was easy for her to charm him because she was younger and prettier than his wife at the time, and she wasn't always busy taking care of those two kids. She was happy for a while with him, but she found him to be rather controlling. He was suspicious of her, always wanting to know where she'd been and to whom she spoke. He just couldn't learn to trust her. So she turned her sights on one of his close friends who seemed a lot nicer. That was ugly, the break up and its aftermath. And no, it didn't last either. After a short while she was looking for someone else.

So, it's gone. And in her wake, she has left a string of broken homes, broken relationships, and broken hearts. Almost everyone in town has been hurt by her in one way or another. Now the women hate her and zealously guard their husbands from her. And to the men she's something of a ... well, let's just say her reputation is well known and is often the subject of their crude joking.

And from the woman's perspective the worst of it is that all her efforts to find what she's been looking for have turned out disastrously. Instead of moving up closer toward her goal, she's been losing ground. The quality of the men she's been able to snag, especially of late, has declined precipitously. She can barely stand the guy she's living with now. He's the worst of the bunch. But what's she going to do? A woman like her needs a man, doesn't she?

Again, we don't know the details, but her story is something like that.

And now as she approaches Jacob's well she sees, of all things, a man sitting there. She can tell by his clothes that he is a Jew, not a Samaritan; so she knows at once that there's no chance of him being the answer to her prayers. Rather ironic, isn't it?

She braces herself for the insults she knows are coming. Jews can't resist making snide comments about Samaritans. And no doubt he can surmise why she's fetching water here at this hour. She decides to ignore him and to go about her business as quickly as possible. He surprises her by saying nothing. When she steals a glance while lowering her water jar on its line, she's even more surprised to see him kindly smiling at her. This is just weird. She quickly looks away. Just as she's got the jar back up and she's about to lift it onto her shoulder, he opens to mouth to speak, and she thinks, "Here it comes."

And then she's nearly floored by what he actually says, "Please, give me a drink." This is insane. No self-respecting Jew would ever drink from a vessel owned by a Samaritan. They think it will defile them. Recovering from her shock, she reminds him of this universally understood protocol. He replies, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink', you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

Just like Nicodemus in the preceding story who took it too literally when Jesus said a person must be born again, she is baffled by the words of Jesus. "What are you, nuts? This well is deep and you have nothing to draw water with. Where are you going to get this 'living water'? Are you someone greater than the patriarch Jacob who gave us this well?" (Well, yes, as a matter of fact; and how.)

Jesus explains that the living water he is speaking of has the power to quench her thirst for good. Again, she takes him too literally. "Yes, that'd be great. I'd like some of that 'living water' so I won't have to keep coming all the way out here to fetch it."

Jesus wants to give her the living water, so he puts his finger right on top of her deepest thirst. “Okay. Go, call your husband and return here.” Ouch. Sore subject. She doesn’t want to talk about it. She tells Jesus that she has no husband. In reply, he tells her that he knows a whole lot more about her than she could have guessed. She’s left to wondering how is it that this Jewish stranger has her whole history down. She concludes that he must have some kind of prophetic insight. And this gives her the opportunity to change the subject to something much less personal, and that Jews and Samaritans were deeply divided on: the place the Lord is to be worshipped, whether in Jerusalem or Mount Samaria. It may be that she’s hoping that this will provoke an argument that will allow her to escape with her Samaritan pride intact. He’ll say this and I’ll insist that, and we’ll go our separate ways.

But Jesus doesn’t take the bait. Instead he speaks of a time coming soon when the question won’t be about *where* God is worshipped, but rather *how*: in Spirit and in truth. Salvation, he tells her, is of the Jews. But he makes it clear that this salvation is for all – all who will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth. He’s speaking of the soon to come founding and spread of the Christian Church. When and wherever the saving Gospel of his death for sin and his resurrection and ascension is proclaimed, there the Holy Spirit will be the living water welling up in hearts to create faith in Jesus who is the way the truth and the life. Through him all the deepest thirsts of mankind are satisfied: the thirst to be loved and accepted by God, to be included in his kingdom, to be forgiven and restored, and to stand before the Lord in a righteousness not of our own, but granted to us by Christ. And this in turn can heal inter-human relationships broken by sin and selfishness and the idolatry of thinking that we can get from other people the peace and contentment that can only come from being in a proper relationship with God through faith in Christ.

At this point, the woman in our story can’t know all that. But she does express her faith in the coming Christ. She says, “When he comes, he will tell us all things.” And that’s precisely what’s happening: the Christ *has* come to her and *is* explaining all things. And through his words, the Holy Spirit creates in her faith in Jesus. He reveals to her that he is the Christ. And she believes.

I’m not sure what whoever it was that decided the lesson should end at this point was thinking; but what follows and was left off is important. Because what happens is that the woman returns to the town and tells everyone that she’s found the Christ. They follow her out to the well, listen to Jesus teach, and having heard him they invite him to stay. He spends the next two days teaching, and by the working of the Spirit they too confess him to be the Christ. They all receive from him the living water that they too were thirsting for. It wells up in all of them. They tell the woman who was their evangelist and to whom they are now very grateful, “We believed initially because of your testimony, but now we’ve heard him for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.” They all got from Jesus the living water. And I suspect that even as she had hoped, the woman never again had to go to all the way out to Jacob’s well to fetch water for her home. Having drank of the living water and having shared it with others, she was no longer an outcast. She had been forgiven and restored by God and by her community as well. And she no longer had to seek in human relationships the peace and contentment that only God can give through faith in Christ.

May the Lord grant us all such thirst for the living water that we too may drink and never thirst again. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!