

### ***“My Soul Thirsts ... for the Living God”***

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: During his earthly ministry the Lord Jesus didn't show any favoritism. He never seemed particularly interested in a person's social standing or station in life, or their history, sex, race, age, marital status, or what have you. When he dealt with people, none of these things seemed to make much difference to him. And perhaps nowhere is that truth presented to us more clearly than in this morning's Gospel lesson, and especially when taken in contrast to the story that immediately precedes it John's Gospel.

Right before the account we just heard, with Jesus talking to the woman at the well, John tells us about his conversation with Nicodemus. He was a wealthy and influential Jew, a very godly man, and a prominent member of the Sanhedrin, which was the ruling council of the Jews (to us he'd be like a Senator or a Congressman). So in one scene we've got Jesus talking patiently to one of the most respected, honorable, and powerful men in Judah, and then in the next scene we've got him expending the same amount of compassion and patience when dealing with a Samaritan woman of doubtful virtue—a woman who from a Jewish perspective would have been viewed as hanging precariously from the absolute bottom rung of the social ladder. But they are both the same to Jesus: lost souls to whom he reaches out in love.

It's actually quite remarkable that Jesus even had this meeting with the Samaritan woman. That's because Jews considered the Samaritans the very scum of the earth, much worse than just your standard godless pagans who occupied the rest of the world. The Jews didn't want to defile themselves by contact with Samaritans. They saw them as a cursed people. Why? Well, it's because the Samaritans were a mixed race descended (in part) from some of the tribes of Israel that had been unfaithful to the point that God had revoked their rights to the Promised Land many centuries before. On account of their idolatry and sexual immorality the Lord allowed an enemy nation to destroy them. This enemy deported all the people of consequence and scattered them over their vast empire. They left behind those whom they didn't feel were worth bothering with, who were not even suitable to serve as slaves; and then they imported into the land Gentiles from various other nations they had conquered so that the group as a whole would have no national identity and so be less likely to rise up in rebellion in the future.

Well, over the centuries, these imported foreigners intermarried with the left-behind, unfaithful Israelites, which itself was bad enough from a Jewish perspective—because if you are of the chosen race you just don't marry Gentiles. But even worse was that these imports brought with them their own pagan gods and religions which then got all mixed up with the already corrupt form of true faith practiced by the original inhabitants. The final result was that the Samaritans practiced a *really* messed up religion: a little of this and a little of that (not unlike some of the cafeteria style Christianity some people practice today). But what really bugged the Jews was that the Samaritans still thought of themselves as faithful to the covenant, and they were quite proud of their being descended from the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So, it made the Jews furious that they had the nerve to speak of the true God and the Promised Land as their own. The Jews called them “dogs”, but they actually thought a whole lot less of them. And in return, the Samaritans despised the Jews and their uppity “we're better than you” attitudes.

So, like I said, it's rather strange that we find Jesus here in Samaria at all, and even a bit scandalous that he takes up a conversation with this woman in particular. First because in that culture gentlemen simply didn't sit and chat with female strangers, but more so because this woman was held in contempt even by her own people. Even Samaritan dogs had standards, and this woman violated all of them.

Her checkered past includes five broken marriages – *five broken homes*, with who knows how many children, and by whom, and who in the world is taking care of them now. And who knows how many relationships short of marriage she's been involved in? She presently has a live-in relationship with a fellow who is not her husband – and the account strongly suggests that he's not single. And that's the problem: not only has she left a trail of her own broken marriages, in her quest to find the right man to make herself happy she's played a part in breaking up a number of other marriages.

That's why we find her at Jacob's well at noon on a hot day. Fetching water was a woman's chore. And it was usually done when it was cool, early in the morning or around sunset. And since all the ladies did it at the same time, it was the main opportunity they had to socialize. But the rest don't want this woman around. She's bad news. She's hurt too many of them, and her ways threaten to hurt more of them. And don't get the wrong idea, I'm not excusing the unfaithful men who have been involved with her – it takes two to tango; but the problem with this woman in particular is that she keeps on changing partners in the middle of the dance. The other women in town do not trust her. They don't want her around and they've let her know it. You see, it turns out that there is a water source much closer to Sychar than Jacob's well. The reason we find her way out here, now, in the heat of the day, is because they've told her she's not welcome to use the nearby watering hole. They don't even want to see her around – and so she's out here now at a time when she knows every other woman in town is setting the table for their family's main meal of the day.

She is here seeking water, one of the most basic necessities of life, way outside of the town. She can't get what she needs to live back there. But today she's going to find a whole lot more than she hoped for. She comes to the well looking for water to quench her thirst, but she will find something to satisfy her deepest and most basic needs.

She must be more than just a little discouraged as she approaches the well. She knows that she has only herself to blame for the way things have turned out in her life – and that only makes the misery of it worse. She's really not happy with her current arrangement—she knows what she's doing is wrong, and you can be sure that boyfriend number six is not the pick of the litter; but it's better than being alone. It's strange: all she ever wanted was to be happy. Somehow that goal always eludes her. Now she's a virtual outcast: hated by the women and the subject of many jokes among the men. And right now, she's hot, she's tired and sweaty, and she knows it will be a long walk back to town with her heavy jar where she has nothing to look forward to but the joyless existence she's endured for so long. And now to make matters even worse, there's someone sitting on the side of the well. Even from a distance she can tell by his clothes that he's a Jew. "Great", she thinks to herself, "here's someone else who thinks it's his duty to make me feel bad about myself."

"Oh well, I must have water to live. I'll just go about my business. I won't say anything. Worst he can do is insult me for being what I was born – though he'll probably guess why I'm fetching water at this time of day." At length she arrives at the well. Ignoring Jesus completely, she takes the ceramic jar from her shoulder. With a sturdy cord tied to the jar, she lowers it some sixty feet down the narrow shaft to the water. The jar is ingeniously designed to fill floating on its side, and as it's just about full, the bottom swings down giving the cord a

noticeable tug. Now she begins the long hand over hand pull upward. It's heavy. There's about five gallons of water in it. And the whole time, she is mentally bracing herself for the demeaning comment she is sure will soon come from this Jew. She's even got a snappy reply ready. But now, as she gets the jar to the top and sets it on the edge of the well, she's a little disappointed that she may not get to use it. She thinks about saying it anyway. She decides to take his measure. For the first time she looks up and steals a glance at him. She is surprised to see that he's looking right at her—probably been watching her the whole time – and he's smiling. And it's not that smug, Jewish, I'm-laughing-at-you smile; he appears genuinely warm and friendly.

She looks away quickly; her internal defenses are in total disarray. She wasn't prepared for kindness. She hastily coils the cord, so she can leave. But then she is taken completely off guard when she hears him speak. "May I have a drink, please?" What's this, some kind of joke? She knows very well that a Jew would never be caught dead drinking from a container used by a Samaritan – they're so holy that they think it defiles them. But he seems serious. She's stymied, so she asks incredulously, "What kind of Jew are you, anyway, asking a Samaritan woman for a drink?"

"You have water there, and I'm thirsty. But if you knew the gift of God here available to you, and who it is that's asking, you'd be asking me for the water of life, and I would give it to you." It's a wonderful offer, but just like Nicodemus in the preceding chapter, the spiritual impact of his words misses her. She's caught up in the physical and worldly – that's all she can see. "C'mon. You've got nothing to draw water with, and the shaft is very deep. Where are you going to get this water you're talking about? Besides, our great ancestor Jacob gave us this well to drink from. It's good water. You think you can out do him?" Do you see how she takes her stand on a matter of Samaritan pride – one she knows will rub a Jew the wrong way? And do you see how ironic her really question is? Jesus, are you greater than Jacob?

But Jesus is very gentle with her: "I'm not talking about this water. This water will satisfy your thirst for a little while, but you'll need to keep coming back for more. My water is different. If you drink my water, you'll never thirst again. In fact, you'll have water welling up inside you for all eternity." Again, it's a wonderful offer. But she still isn't catching on to the spiritual meaning of his words. On the surface it sounds pretty good. If she never got thirsty, if she had water to spare, she wouldn't have to come out here in the hot sun every day and lug it back into town. Why, she could sit at home and laugh at all those other women who still had to do this thankless chore day after day – those women who had said such cruel things to her. Oh, that would be sweet. "Sure, give me some of this water you're talking about."

"Alright, first go get your husband and come back." And you see what Jesus has done is put his finger right on her sorest spot. This is her real thirst, her deepest and most basic need: to be loved, to belong to someone, to be valued ... it's the need to have security and companionship that is not tied to what someone thinks they can get out of her. It's the need to be loved and accepted and forgiven and trusted by another in spite of all past failures and current shortcomings. This is what she has been seeking in her relationships with men. She knows that her approach to the problem has been all wrong, but she's justified herself all along by thinking, "if I only had the right guy, all my problems would be over". But though she's drunk from many such wells, they have all failed to satisfy her. Each one in turn looked good for a while (or so she told herself at the time); but she always found out the truth the hard way. They all turned out to be selfish, unkind, manipulative, unfaithful ... some of them were even abusive. Not one has ever trusted her; and it's funny how *that* problem seems to get worse each time she changes partners. At this point she knows full well that she is trying to draw clean water from

the murky bottom of a polluted well – but still she keeps trying. With each failed effort she just gets thirstier for what she really wants.

A while back one of the fast food chains was running a television ad for a spicy sandwich they were selling. A guy is shown eating one and sweat is breaking out on his forehead. He reaches for his drink and takes a slurp on the straw, but all he gets is that sucking sound that says the cup is empty. No relief there; his mouth is still burning. Then his eye falls on a bottle of red pepper sauce sitting on the table in front of him. He thinks about it for a few seconds, and then takes the bottle, tilts it back and drains it, apparently quenching his thirst. The indication is that the sandwich is so spicy, that even the hot pepper sauce gives him some relief. Now, everybody gets this joke – it's obvious that no one is going to find relief drinking hot pepper sauce; and yet, that's exactly what this woman has been doing. She's been turning to various behaviors that destroy relationships in order to build what she hopes will be a stable one. It can't work. But she can't help it—her thirst is killing her. And every time she drinks something that looks like it might give her relief, her burning thirst increases all the more. She's involved in a self-destructive spiral that can only end in sorrow, misery, and lonely isolation for her – and at this point, she's just about at the bottom of the well.

And it's funny: we can see it so clearly in her. I wonder if we realize that at times we all do exactly the same thing. Just think how often you find your own human relationships dry and unfulfilling, and you find yourself convinced that if whomever it is you're having trouble with were different, then you would be satisfied. Or maybe you're trying to satisfy your thirst for belonging, purpose, and security through your career, or in material wealth, or in some other form of personal achievement or entertainment. These and many other things are wells that seem to give temporary relief but ultimately leave you even more parched and dry. And so in the end, in desperation, we end up turning on each other, like so many competing vampires trying to draw from one another the moisture we all want for ourselves. And when each attempt fails, when we run out of options, we are forced to go looking elsewhere for what we need.

That's what drove this Samaritan woman to Jacob's well: her thirst that could not be quenched with natural water. But what she found there was a supernatural Spring: the water of life, which is Jesus Christ and his Word. Recognizing her great need, and even her inability to understand it, Jesus revealed himself to her as her Savior and Lord. He intervened to break the self-destructive cycle of failed relationships by giving her himself: his love, his forgiveness, his friendship, and a restored relationship with his Father – which is fallen mankind's most desperate thirst. And in the process, he changed her from a consumer of water to a source of it. As the stories continues, she leaves behind her water jar and hurries to go share what she has found with her neighbors in town – the very people who had driven her out and made her feel so bad. In the end they too are filled to overflowing with the water of life to which she leads them.

And the same is true for each of us. For all your deepest and most heartfelt thirsts, only Jesus Christ has the water that can truly quench them. Nowhere else will you ever find lasting contentment. But I'll warn you that to do it, he has to put his finger right where it hurts the most: right on top of your sin. He doesn't do it to hurt you; he does it to heal you. He must show you where your deepest thirst is so that he can relieve it with his forgiveness and love. That's what he wants to do for you every day through his Word. And in so doing, he will enable you to forgive and love others the same way – because then he will be the water of life springing up within you. May God grant it to each of us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***