

One of the joys of growing up for me and my brother was going to our friends house in Pennsylvania. It was only about an hour and a half away but as young kids it felt like a world away...and it was... figuratively. These friends lived in the country and owned a farm. We lived in the suburbs of Buffalo. They cultivated corn and other vegetables, we got ours from local vegetable stands; had a cow, a horse and lots of land that we could run and play in. They also had a camp a few miles up the mountain from their home ...a cabin which was somewhat primitive. It did have an indoor toilet and indoor running water but we preferred to go outdoors to get a drink. We would go outside and remove the wood covering that hid an underground well. Then we would lean over and see all those water spiders scurrying around the surface and salamanders sitting along its edge..

It was exciting for us to reach down into that water, below the surface and come back up with a ladle full of cool, crisp, clean water. We were mesmerized by this and all the freedom we had at that place to run and play unsupervised. It was tucked away up the mountain where neighbors were very few and far between. We thought it was the greatest thing and it made us feel so grownup to get our own water and decide our own agendas . Have any of you ever had a well experience? An opportunity to take a long handled ladle and dip it into the waiting water or lower a bucket down and bring it up and drink from a well?

Today's Gospel reading is about a woman of Samaria who also came to a well not only to get a drink but to get her daily supply of water to carry miles back to her home. It probably was not quite as pleasant a chore, especially having to do it day in and day out, as our well experience up at the camp.

It is fascinating that you can go to Israel today and take a journey to Samaria to the town of Sychar. A place the passage of time seems to have forgotten. Not many people live there, about 300, and they still consider themselves Samaritans. The primary structure in town is a kind of cellar, which houses a well, the only source of water for miles. Archeologists estimate its date upwards of 4,000 years. Weary travelers have quenched their thirst there since the time of Jacob. But even more fascinating than its archeological significance is the fact that this place historically validates for us the precise location where the Samaritan woman had an encounter with the Christ. It's hard to believe but the authenticity of the well is undisputed. Samaritans, Muslims, Christians, Jews all agree that this is the place where the story took place.

The woman came to the well because of a physical thirst. She knew she needed the water from Jacob's well. But Jesus looked into her soul and saw a deeper thirst and he sought to help her to see it. It was not an easy insight to gain. He offered her water, he said, living water that would quench her thirst forever.

She took it quite literally. She liked the idea of never having to come back to that well. Then Jesus asked her questions, questions that revealed he knew things about her he should not have known. things that revealed this deeper thirst.

She had not found the water she truly needed in other relationships, even in marriage. For what she thirsted for and did not know it until now was a relationship with God -a life-giving, fresh, vital fellowship with the One who created her and loved her more than anyone. This is the water Jesus offered her. I think the challenge is still the same. Our physical needs are so apparent. We feel hunger so we eat. We feel cold so we put on a coat. We get thirsty so we get something to drink. Physical needs: they make themselves known to us and we spend a good deal of our time and lives meeting them. But just as surely as we have physical needs, we also have spiritual needs. We are spiritual beings. We need more than just food and water. We need companionship, love, friendship, affection, a sense of well being and meaning that go beyond just having physical needs met.

A nurse once who told me about something that happened to her. She was a Christian and was not afraid to say so if her patients asked or sought her prayers. One day she was about to leave the room of a patient when she asked, "Do you need anything?" And the man replied, "Yes. I need God."

Here was a man in a hospital room with an IV attached to glucose which contained all the nourishment he needed physically but deep inside he was spiritually dry. She spent some time reading the Bible with him and praying, dipping from the waters where she had found refreshment.

Saint Augustine said it this way in his CONFESSIONS, "Lord, you made us for yourself. We can know no rest until we rest in thee."

Just as surely as each of us has a physical thirst for water, we each also have a spiritual thirst that only God can quench. No other relationship, no other well can satisfy this deep inner sense of yearning and emptiness. "Do you need anything?" "Yes. I need God. We need God."

When we get thirsty, what do we do? We go to the faucet or frig and get something to drink. We know where to go to meet our physical thirst. Where do we go to find that which meets this deeper thirsty? There are many wells out there that are constantly advertise as the one to meet all our needs... materialism. drugs...physical pleasures of all kinds...philosophies and pseudo-religions that promise inner peace and outer prosperity. ..and many drink from these wells...and still end up thirsty.

But this I know is true, as others throughout history also say, that in Jesus Christ I have found a mighty and deep well of God. In him, his life, his teachings, his love, his presence I have seen and heard God bubbling up like an eternal spring of water. I have found water for my soul from this well that is Jesus...just as the woman in this story. This very same Well is here for you too. It's given for everyone. I know it holds water your soul needs.

I love that verse (28) which says she left her water jug there and went back into the village to tell everyone about the new well and water she had found. She had forgotten all about her other thirst, leaving the jar, leaving that thirst behind. She had found a much deeper well and much more refreshing water . And that's what being a witness for Christ is, It is just one thirsty soul telling another where to find water. This very week you will see them. You will recognize the thirst in them. You will be given the opportunity to direct them to the path that leads to the Well where they can find water for their souls. You will not do so in a harsh or judgmental way but simple as one thirsty soul to another.

The gospel passage actually continues like this: *41 And many more believed because of his word. 42 They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."*

Now you will notice that I did not take a lot of time describing the Samaritan woman and the cultural differences that made her encounter with Jesus scandalous to his disciples. This morning it is not the woman who is the star of this encounter for us. She is just a conduit... One who carries the water, albeit living water, back to others. It is the others that are the stars. For they are influenced by this less-than-desirable woman to follow her back and to meet this Jesus.

They were willing to stop what they were doing to follow what would appear to be a less than reliable source of wealth of information. They followed her back and had an encounter with Jesus.

Each week I get up here and dip into the well of living water. I share with you insights and things that I believe God has given me for you. I am the woman at the well who is coming to this community saying, "Come, I have met someone who has told me everything I have ever done." And like the woman at the well, some of you believe because of what I say. But others I fear are like the dog in the cartoon. You know the one. In the first frame his owner is scolding or admonishing the dog for something and goes on and on about why the dog should not be acting like this. The inscription under this frame says, "The master says...; "Pooch, bad dog, you should never lift your leg on the sofa, what am I going to do with you. Now I have to go out and buy a new couch, do you know how much that is going to cost?, etc.

In the next frame the dog is there looking up at his master and the inscription says.. and the dog hears, “Blah, blah, blah, blah. I know that for many of you this is not applicable. But I can’t help feeling that sometimes when I go back to my office after preaching that the only thing some of you may have heard was “blah, blah, blah, blah.” So for me, this morning, the star of this passage is the crowd who follows the women and meets Jesus face to face. Their response, even of those who believed the woman’s testimony, was “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.

I have been asked, “Do you pray for us?” My answer is “Yes. I pray for you.” I may not be always praying about your immediate need, your need for physical water, but my prayer for you is always that you recognize that Jesus is standing with you ready to give you the living water. This gospel reading is made complete only if we -the listeners-take hold of the woman’s testimony and make it our own. Salvation cannot be about what others say. It has to be about what has happened to us. Let this Jesus of Spirit and Truth take hold of you today. May you hear for yourself this morning and know for yourself that this is truly the Savior of the world. Amen.