

Lent 2
March 20, 2011

Living Water for Eternal Life

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John 4:5-26

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

While the human body can typically go for more than a month without food, a person can die in three days without water. Can you remember a time when you were really thirsty? I'm not talking about the medical symptoms of dehydration... I mean, how did you feel when you were super thirsty? Maybe it was after a workout, or sports practice. Maybe it was after working outside in the heat. Maybe it was after a stomach flu. The more thirsty you are, the more you crave water. Water becomes the only thing you can think about. And when you finally get some, it brings so much relief that after a long drink, you can't help but let out that , "A-a-a-h!" because of the relief that drink brought you.

In the message today, our God speaks of a kind of water that quenches a deep, spiritual thirst that each one of us has. But unlike real thirst, often times a person has to first be made aware that this thirst is there before he really starts to experience it. It's not that the thirst isn't there in everyone, it just that many people don't recognize the feeling *as* spiritual thirst. They interpret it to be something else. They ignore it. Or they rationalize that everyone must just feel this way.

Before us today is the story of the Samaritan woman. Through this story, let's answer some questions about this spiritual thirst, and the water that quenches that thirst. The first question is this: Who is the living water from God for? In other words, whose thirst does God want to quench? Let's look at the story.

The setting is this: It was near the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The Pharisees already did not like John the Baptist. As Jesus began to draw even larger crowds, the Pharisees liked him even less. Jesus sensed the heat was building, and decided he better leave the southern part of Israel called Judea (where Jerusalem was) and head back north to Galilee. He knew it was not yet his time to suffer and die.

Now, to travel from Judea to Galilee, the most direct route takes you through the region of Samaria. Jews would frequently *not* take that route and instead take the long way just to avoid contact with the Samaritans. A quick reminder: Samaritans and Jews hated each other. Samaritans were of mixed blood... part Jewish and part "other." They were also of mixed religion: some of their beliefs coming from Judaism, some beliefs borrowed from "other" religions. The strife dated back hundreds of years earlier when many Jews returned from exile and decided to rebuild the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. The Samaritans actually came and offered to help. The returning Jews refused their help. And so the strife began. Shunned, the Samaritans established Mt. Gerazim as their holy mountain, while the Jews had the temple in Jerusalem as their holy place.

So... Jesus is traveling through Samaria. He doesn't avoid these people, but purposely travels through this area. And here's what the text says, **"So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)"**

Everything Jesus did here was weird. It was countercultural. First of all, Jesus talks to a Samaritan. He's supposed to hate Samaritans! Why would he engage one in conversation? Second, this was a woman. In that culture, for a man to speak to a woman publicly, especially about religious matters, was unheard of. Even if she had been Jewish, what Jesus did would have been considered weird.

There is a third thing that made this conversation highly unusual, but we didn't read that part yet. This woman was a sinner. And by "sinner" I mean the kind of woman that the other women gossiped about all the time. A woman who had had 5 husbands. A woman who was shacking up with her sixth man, but was not yet married to him. That kind of reputation is actually noticed even in our liberal society today... how much more in that ancient culture where such behavior was simply unacceptable. It must have been the scandal of the town where she lived.

And Jesus talked to her. Jesus spoke the truth to her. Jesus wanted her to be forgiven and saved. Jesus offers her – her, of all people! – living water. And that's something worth noting.

APPL: Is there anything about you that you feel would disqualify you from entering into a conversation with Jesus about living water... about forgiveness, life and salvation? Because of who you are, what you've done, how you feel about yourself... if Jesus were alive and in Omaha today... would you expect that he would avoid you and pass you by? Would you feel there was someone more worthy for him to talk to than yourself?

Dear friends, today Jesus is coming *to you*. Yes, even you. Do you have a hidden sin? Do you have a serious sin you've committed? Do you have a sin that's got a hold on your life that you just can't seem to shake? Jesus wants to talk to you today. Now that's good news and bad news, depending on how you want to look at it. You see, Jesus doesn't overlook your sins and pretend they don't exist. Jesus doesn't accept your sinfulness and turn a blind eye to it. As we're about to see, Jesus confronts sin head on. But here's what I want you to get: when it comes to this discussion about living water... know this: this discussion is for everyone here today. I don't care who you are, what you've done, whether you're a member or a guest today, whether you're a life-long Christian, a new Christian, or still finding out what Christianity is all about; whatever your past and whatever you present; whatever your age; whatever your position; whatever your income; no matter how good or how bad you think you are... Jesus is talking to *you* today about some living water. So listen up!

So Jesus had just asked her for water, and she's surprised he's actually talking to her. The story continues:

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

Isn't this amazing how smoothly Jesus transitions the conversation? They're talking about getting a drink, and just like that, Jesus turns the conversation to things spiritual. So after Jesus engages her in a dialog by asking her for water, he now piques her curiosity by saying something a little cryptic. He's hinting to her that there is more to him than meets the eye. He reveals that he has some kind of mysterious living water that he can give as a gift. She bites.

"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

She's a little confused. She thinks Jesus might be talking about physical water yet. Where was he going to get this living water when he didn't even have anything to draw from the well? But she does seem to get his hint that he is a great person sent from God. So she asks if he is greater than Jacob who had dug that well some 2000 years earlier.

Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Oh, it was a pain to make that 10 minute walk to the well every single day, carrying those heavy jars of water! If she could just get some of this living water that would keep her from getting thirsty again, that would be great!

She’s not getting it yet, is she? But Jesus is setting the stage. He’s got her thinking. Her mind is turning. The image of bubbling, living water is now stuck in her head. She’s turning it over. She’s curious. She’s fully engaged in the conversation. Jesus the master teacher is about to reveal everything.

He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” Here is where Jesus drops the bombshell. His question sounds innocent enough. It should not have surprised her when Jesus said this. A conversation like this would normally be carried out with the husband, wife listening. But Jesus isn’t asking this because of cultural sensitivities. He’s asking in order to expose her sin.

“I have no husband,” she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

Now her mind was racing. How could this Jewish stranger know her sordid past? How could he be aware of her current sin... shacking up with a man with whom she had not made a life-long commitment? She was progressing now, for she understood this man was not a normal man. He had to be at least a prophet. And she admits it to Jesus:

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

Wow, that was slick wasn’t it? Did you notice how quickly she changed the subject and how masterfully she stepped out from under the bright heat lamp? She quickly thought of a way to divert the conversation from herself, and instead start a religious argument. Because if any Samaritan asked that question of any other Jew, the sparks would have flown. Any other Jewish man would have spent the next several hours debating intensely about proper place to worship God, and how Jerusalem was the only right place.

She made a great attempt to divert this discussion. But Jesus didn’t bite. He had a goal in mind and a message to share, and he was not about to start arguing religion with this woman. **Jesus declared, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”**

This was not what she was expecting. Jesus didn’t defend glorious Jerusalem as the center of all true worship. Instead, he said that true worship didn’t happen at a particular geographical location! Instead, true worship takes place when it happens in spirit and in truth.

Now what does that mean, to worship in spirit and in truth? In the context, the discussion was just about location for worship. And it was also about which belief system was correct. Do the Jews have it right or the Samaritans? Jesus responds the true worship is in spirit and in truth. That means true worship happens when your *heart and soul centers on worship*, not when your body is in a certain physical location. God is Spirit, and he is not confined to a certain temple or a certain mountain, and true worship cannot be either. And true worship takes place **in truth**: when worship

is in full harmony with the truth God has revealed about himself in his word. So true worship takes place where there is a heart completely dedicated to God, and where the worshipper knows what the one true God has revealed in his Word.

APPL: Have you ever fallen into a similar way of thinking? As long as I'm at church, I'm worshipping God and he's pleased? It's not true. I'm guessing happens all the time that people are physically present for a worship service, and yet leave the service not having worshipped at all. It's not about performing the right liturgy. It's not about reciting the right words. It's not about going through the motions and doing the right things. Is your heart in it? Are you engaged in worship? Are you listening to his truth or are you distracted? Are you responding with truly repentant hearts, or are they hardened? Are you touched by the revelation of God's love and forgiveness, or is this just not sinking in? True worship is in spirit and in truth.

Now listen to the last couple verses:

The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

Jesus finally reached the goal! He shared what his heart yearned to share. This whole discussion had finally led her to see that she was a sinner in need of saving. That talk about her sinful way of life had made her spiritually parched. She needed relief. She needed hope. She needed forgiveness. Her thoughts turned to a promised Savior... Messiah... Christ. One who was promised through the prophets who would save God's people. The woman knew that he was coming. She trusted he would reveal all truth. And then Jesus drops the bomb: "I who speak to you am he." [Repeat.] Her soul got the long cold drink it had so yearned for. God's promised Messiah was here! He would save the people from their sins. He would save *all* people... Jews, Samaritans... everyone! The draught was over. She drank deeply from the living water Jesus offered. Eternal life entered her that day.

Friends, are you thirsty? Are you thirsty for the living water that gives eternal life? Maybe you're not. If you're sitting there thinking, "I dunno," then think: what would Jesus have brought up in your life past and present that would make you blush? If he all of a sudden blurted out what you thought was hidden from him? Does the thought of that make your mouth go dry? I pray that it does. Is your heart yearning for relief from this parched spiritual condition? Don't you just wish there was a relief? Forgiveness? A drink of living water that would fix it all and give you eternal life?

Good news. There is! Jesus says to you today, "The water I give you will become in you a spring of water welling up to eternal life." Jesus' holy life fills up all that's missing in your own life. Jesus suffering and death, pulls from your life all the sin and dirt that makes you unfit to stand in your creator's presence. He pours out the satisfying water of his grace into your parched heart and soul and grants you eternal life. "A-a-a-ah!" Just what you needed. Enjoy! This living water bubbles up in you now and forever. Thanks be to our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.