

Pastor's Message – 3/12/2023

John 4:5-42

You might guess that air is the most common element in the world, but actually, the most common substance in the world is water. It is so common and basic that we might not even realize how essential it is and how it composes such a great percentage of the things around us. Your body is about 65 percent water. A potato or an earthworm are 70 percent water and a tomato is about 95 percent water. Water is in the ground, in the air, and in the things around us. We use it for recreation, and waterways are used for transportation. Without it life could not go on.

Just prior to our Bible reading for today, things have become “hot” for Jesus in Judea, so He goes on the road, heading for His home base in Galilee. The Bible says in verse four, “He had to go through Samaria on the way.” Not all roads to Galilee lead through Samaria. Strikingly, he goes through rather than around Samaria — unheard of for the pious Jew, since Samaria was filled with foreigners and peoples of different religions sent to colonize the area by Sargon of Assyria (cf. 2 Kings 17:24-34).

The Samaritans had opposed the Jewish restoration of Jerusalem and had assisted in the persecutions of the Jews by the Syrians. At best, Samaritans were considered to be religious renegades. Yet Jesus' path takes him straight through this questionable region. Even more questionable is Jesus' conversation with a woman at Jacob's well. Not only do Jews “not share things in common with Samaritans” (v. 9), but men in general and rabbis in particular did not speak to strange women. In merely asking for water, Jesus has violated a number of social conventions!

Jesus uses the occasion to teach the woman He meets at “Jacob's well” and us about “living water.” The promise of “living water” not only reflects an ongoing biblical theme, highlighted in John's gospel, but is a pun of sorts, for “living water” was a common expression at that time for running water, as opposed to a stagnant cistern. This sets the stage for a typical ambiguity that we see often in the gospel of John: the woman will think that Jesus is offering plumbing, where Jesus has something more symbolic in mind (vv. 11-12).

Her question, “Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?” (v. 12) shows that she does not understand the first thing about who Jesus is. But note that we the readers aren't much further ahead of her — we know that Jesus is in fact greater than Jacob, but we are not exactly clear what the symbolism of the water refers to (grace? revelation? the Spirit?). Jesus never fills in the blank for us — the imagery is left for us to ponder, never flattened into a pat answer. Neither we nor the woman fully understand what Jesus is offering — she asks for what she cannot fully

comprehend, because she is still thinking in literal terms. Where Jesus is offering a life of grace, she sees only the freedom from household drudgery.

I'm not willing to sell her that short however. I agree with some other theologians who see the Samaritan woman as one of the most theologically informed persons in the Fourth Gospel. She knows the regulations about ritual purity (verse 9), ancestral traditions of Israel (verse 12), the necessity to worship at a valid temple (verses 19-20), and the expectation of a Messiah (verse 25). She is, in short, conversant in Samaritan theology [which is not surprising since, unlike Jews, Samaritans educated religiously both male and female children], and Jesus takes her seriously as a discussion partner.

She is a religious seeker, open to questions and answers that others might not even ask or consider. She allows for the idea that she doesn't have all the answers, is surprised that Jesus knows things about her that He shouldn't know and allows that He might be a prophet. Her report to the townsfolk, however, contains both a seed of exaggeration and a seed of doubt: "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" (v. 29).

I find the woman's water jug to be intriguing. She came to the well to draw water but became so involved in her conversation with Jesus that she left the jug behind and ran away to tell everyone. She never does come back for it — it just sits there, all during Jesus' lecture to the disciples (and for all we know, during the whole two days he stayed in Samaria). (Hang on to the water jug—we'll come back to it later.) She goes away, not quite convinced—not quite understanding, but she's not the only one.

Unfortunately, the disciples have the same problem of misunderstanding as the woman. They do not understand why he has broken social convention to speak to this woman (v. 27). Nor do they understand what he means when he says, "I have food to eat that you do not know about" (v. 32, note how the symbolic weight has shifted from water to its related necessity, food — the reverse of the movement in the Exodus story). Their lack of understanding is highlighted in their response, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" (v. 33). Jesus speaks in a more direct fashion to the disciples than he did to the woman, eliminating any misunderstanding at once: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work" (v. 34).

The disciples think that Jesus must be hungry. The woman is thirsty for "living water." Food and water—sustenance of different kinds are necessary for life, but not all of human needs are food and water: physical stuff.

People experience thirst of all sorts, and different cultures offer different ways to slake them, some more effective than others. In the United States, the most popular "thirst quenchers" may increase thirst in the long run, as carbonation, caffeine, alcohol and sugar conspire in any combination to reduce the net fluids of the body. Bottled water sells these days in an amazing variety of forms—commanding high prices. None of these drinks—no bottled-water company has

given the world water which -- if you drink them, quench your thirst ... forever! None of these drinks can quench the thirsting in your soul!

People everywhere are trying all sorts of things to satisfy a spiritual thirst, yet coming away empty. People try more money or a bigger house or a more powerful truck. People try alcohol or drugs or relationships. People try this hobby or that pastime and hold onto the dream of the perfect job or the perfect spouse or the perfect family. Maybe it's the right smartphone or the most technologically up-to-the-minute tablet or computer. People search on Facebook or any number of dating sites or the perfect vacation destination.

Maybe the weather isn't just what we want it to be and, if only we had more snow or less snow or more rain or less rain or warmer temperatures or cooler temperatures, then life would be better and maybe even perfect. The Dow Jones average went up today and bonds went down. Bit coins are the monetary investment of the future or maybe just the latest fad. This Church—this Pastor—aren't meeting my needs, so we'll try the one down the block or around the corner or maybe we'll just start our own Church. So much bread which will not satisfy and so much water which will not quench our thirst.

The answer is right in front of us and even within us, but how do you and I come to believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord, our Savior, our Messiah? What life-transforming encounter with him changed our hearts and minds and caused us to want to go and tell others the good news? What was it that happened that brought us to confess him as Lord? It is important to share our witness and Samaritan woman's conversion story gives us the perfect opportunity to reflect on where we have found life-giving water if, in fact, we have found that water that quenches our thirst forever.

John Wesley believed that even if people had been rightly baptized as infants, they still needed a baptism of the Holy Spirit in order to move from disbelief to partial belief to full belief. He thought this kind of baptism— a quickening of the heart, a personal encounter with the risen Christ that brought them to personal conversion as adults—was just as necessary as baptism with water.

As United Methodists we baptize with water, but we also believe that followers of Jesus Christ must come to a moment of personal conversion in their journey toward perfection. And these kinds of conversions do not always come according to our church schedules!

The more recent practice of confirming young people primarily because they have reached a certain age, rather than waiting for the Holy Spirit to move upon their hearts, has perhaps taken something away from the very real need for people to be transformed by a personal encounter with the risen Lord. John Wesley was adamantly opposed to confirmation.

Maybe that's because it wasn't until later in life that Wesley "felt his heart strangely warmed" by the power of the Holy Spirit that night after a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Road.

One of the "holy grails" of modern technology is the long-lasting battery. Each new battery has sought to outlast its predecessor. We have progressed from simple cell batteries to rechargeable nickel-cadmium batteries to nickel-zinc and nickel metal hydride and lithium ion batteries. Now, a recent innovation by Toshiba into super-charge ion batteries has offered the promise of an even longer lasting battery for future electric cars. Yet, as much as we try to come up with some new type of long-lasting battery, each one of them will eventually go dead and need to be recharged.

When the Samaritan woman went to the well, she, too, needed a recharge -- in this case, water. However, this water would do nothing to refresh her spiritually. What Jesus offered her -- and us -- is that inexhaustible battery, namely himself, his "living water." When we get dry, when our batteries get low, we have an everlasting supply of spiritual power. All we need to do is tap into it -- into Jesus -- and get recharged.

Back to the water jug. The Samaritan woman went into town after her conversation with Jesus. And she did leave her jug with him. After all, Jesus did promise the woman "living water" that would lead to "eternal life." I imagine him keeping his promise and filling the jug to the brim (cf. John 2:7). As we have seen, even as the woman runs away, she hasn't quite made up her mind. The jug stands for the unfinished business between Jesus and the woman. The woman's jar remains by the well, because the story isn't through with her yet. It will never be through with her. She will keep coming back to Jesus for the living water that leads to eternal life, because it is not a once and done, once saved always saved encounter. Salvation and sanctification—being made holy—involves "remaining" with Jesus and in Jesus all through our lives.

She has to leave her jar with him. He isn't done with her yet. As the woman's story is open-ended, so is ours. We must now decide how to respond to Jesus' self-revelation. And if we want the water he offers, we must leave our jars by the well for Jesus to refill. He's not done with us yet either. Just as the Samaritan woman needed to move from disbelief to partial belief to full belief, so we, too, must move from disbelief to partial belief to full belief.

Reflect on and consider the "living water" that Jesus promises you and let the form or forms of thirst you see in your own life and the lives of the people around you guide your prayer and your spiritual life. But don't stop there. Our Bible story today doesn't stop there. Instead, it points us to God, the source of living water, a stream that never runs dry, and to what happens when it is God who truly and completely quenches our thirst.

Nothing and no one else can satisfy—nothing and no one else can quench the thirsting in our souls. Continue to open your heart and mind and soul and arms to the God who loves enough to give all that we might have all. May the life giving water of God overflow your jug that it might never run dry.