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St. Thomas Church
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Ex. 17:1-7; Jn 4:5-42

The Power of Living Water

It's hard for us who live with an over-abundance of piped in tap water and almost constant rain to enter immediately into this story, as beautiful and as powerful as this story happens to be. Jesus and his disciples have had a long, hot day of travelling on the parched road leading from Judea to Galilee. Jesus is thirsty and is waiting at the well, while his disciples go into town for food.

But why is his Samaritan woman alone? Why is she venturing into the heat at the very hottest time of the day? There, at the well, in the early morning or during the cooler evening the women of the village could find refreshment and fellowship. But this woman is not one of them. She is walking toward Jesus, and the well, alone. Where are her friends? Does she wear a scarlet letter that Jesus has not yet seen? Is she divorced? Is she widowed? We do not know what her story is. We learn later that she has had five husbands and the man she is with now, she is not married to.

Traditionally male theologians have been quick to assume that her personal sin is the cause of her woes. There is so much we do not know about her and her story. But what we do know that it was a man's world back then and there was little a woman could do to prevent a divorce that her husband wanted to initiate—sometimes for the most trivial of reasons. Yes, it has most certainly taken a whole village and culture to help create her predicament.

However, little of this speculating seems to be on Jesus' mind when he opens his parched lips and utters, "Give me a drink." In his fatigue, he has apparently lost his manners. The Samaritan woman, who remains unnamed, has already sized him up as being from another tribe. Was it Jesus' accent? Was it his clothing? Was he wearing the wrong tattoo? What exactly was it that made Jesus look like an outsider?

At first, she appears shocked and defensive, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Men and women are not allowed to meet like this. Jews and Samaritans are not allowed to meet like this. "Jesus, don't you know the playbook?" As confining and oppressive as these rules are, it is all she knows, and so she appeals to the rules of her tribe and village to help her out of an awkward, and potentially dangerous and scandalous situation. She says, "Jesus, this is not only unsafe, it is crazy!"

And Jesus is still thirsty. No water has yet touched his lips. It becomes more obvious that he thirsts for something deeper and more life-giving than water itself. He moves the

conversation deeper by talking about “living” water. The Samaritan woman is puzzled to be sure, “Isn’t the water from Jacob’s well good enough? You must not be very thirsty, Jesus, if you are still wondering about the quality of the water.”

Jesus remains patient. He is thirsty for a deeper conversation with her and remains determined to get there if she will allow herself to go there. He sees the possibility for her going deeper like a deep-sea diver who catches the glimmer of a shiny object at the bottom of the sea floor and decides to make another attempt. And what is the shiny object? It is the awareness that Jesus knows everything about her, her past, her mistakes, the pain that she has suffered, her strengths, her courage. Jesus knows everything about her and He still loves her.

In the presence of this intimacy and love, she begins to awaken to a thirst within her that is over-powering, “I know there is hope. I know that the Messiah is coming. I thought it was too good to be true but I never stopped hoping for a different way of living in this world.” And then comes the gushing and rushing waters of transformation that Jesus’ promised her and promises to us. He reveals his complete identity to a woman that even his disciples cannot comprehend: “I am He. The One you have been waiting for!”

Larger than his identity defined by his gender, tribe, and religion, Jesus reveals his true and complete self: “I am the Messiah, your Messiah; I am the one who you have been looking for. I have come to save you!” And at that moment the Samaritan woman also discovers that her identity is larger than that what can be defined by her gender, tribe, and religion. The woman at the well represents a part of all of us that thirsts, desires, and yearns to uncover the truth about God and ourselves.

Although the woman at the well, was lonely and likely on the margins of her society, it is likely she had food enough to eat and water to drink. As important as these things are, they did not begin to touch her deepest needs. Have you ever felt like that? I know I have. Have you ever felt alone and without enough deep, authentic, and soulful relationships that allow you to be your deepest and fullest self?

Do you ever find yourself going through the motions day by day—gathering water from the well—putting food on the table—even distracting yourself with interesting entertainment and recreation but not experiencing the abundant and joyful life that Jesus promises for each one of us?

Recently I had a very interesting experience in a hot tub at 8,000 feet in the beautiful Sierra Nevada Mountain range that surround Lake Tahoe in Northern California. After a long day on the ski slopes my good friend David and I jumped seeking relief for our sore muscles. I wasn’t expecting to stay long. We were surrounded by a group of six younger men in their early thirties who were drinking beer and being rowdy and, well, acting like many skiers and snow boarders that I happen to know.

They turned out to be a very friendly and thirsty group. We began to chat. They introduced themselves and what they do. Most were married and had young kids. One was in the process of divorcing. And then came the moment I have come to dread—especially when I am on vacation and, theoretically, off-duty. So, Steve, what do you do for a living? Well, Jesus style, I decided to see if there was any living water in the hot tub. So, I decided, with the Spirit’s prompting to test the waters. “I’m a priest and marriage and family therapist.”

There was silence. And then some nervous laughter. And then there was revelation. After I reassured them that I wasn’t writing a book and I wasn’t planning to post the evenings events on Facebook, they each began to open up in their own way. Some spoke of their fears that they would repeat the same mistakes that their parents had made and that they would end up divorcing their partners. Others asked heart felt questions about where they could find resources to help strengthen their marriages. This hot tub had become a place of “living water” before my very eyes. I’m reminded of the fact that all the world is a sacrament if we allow it to be. And this sacrament took place because of God’s grace, authentic revelation, and the intentional decision to wade into the water with folks.

Now one last look at the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. I find that that the most fascinating part of this story for me is that Jesus shared with this lonely and unpopular woman his deepest secret. He told her that he was the Messiah, the one who is different, the ultimate revealer of truth, the one who resists settling for the superficial, the one who dives in deep with us and crosses boundaries, and the one who pursues us with a passion until we are all swimming with him in the waters of our own baptisms and rebirth.

May all of us run into town, like this dear Samaritan woman did, or even a ski resort, drop our buckets, our coffee cups and skis, and proclaim the Great News: that Jesus knows fully and completely who we are and he loves us even more because of it. What Jesus did for this woman from Samaria, he does for us. Each one of us. At our baptism—even at 8,000 feet—he gives us the Spirit—the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of living water welling up inside each and every one of us, leading us to eternal life. It is the power of living water! Amen.