



March 23, 2014

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Thirsty? – John 4:5-42

Today's lesson is the third turning point in Jesus's ministry in three Sundays. The first was his forty days in the wilderness, understanding his unique nature; last week was his simple message of salvation, using Moses as his theme; today, he starts a new direction in his ministry. Several, really.

Most of us know this story very well. I mention it nearly every Sunday as I pour the water of remembrance at the beginning of worship. There are several favorite points that preachers like to talk about, and we'll start with some of those: one, Jesus is in Samaria, foreign territory, surprising for a teacher – the Samaritans were the remnant of the Northern Kingdom that split off after Solomon's reign, the Southern Kingdom, Judah, home of the Jews and Jerusalem. It *is* odd that he's there.

Second, the unnamed woman comes to the well, not just alone, but at noon. Usually, they went to the well in early morning and evening, stocking up on household water, and it was a major social event where

news and relationships were kept up-to-date. For her to come alone and at noon means either that she was uncomfortable or unwelcome in her village's circle of women: she's an outcast.

Third, Jesus speaks to her. Surprising that he'd talk to any woman at all, it's astounding that he'd talk to a sketchy, unaccompanied, foreign woman.

And fourth, this woman with a very dubious past rushes to tell her fellow villagers to come and see this man who told her "everything [she'd] ever done." For crying out loud, THEY already *know* everything she's ever done: it's a small village, after all.

Now, these are all important, and many wonderful sermons have been based on them. But there's still more.

You've heard the story. So have I. But I never pick up this book without learning something, without having my spirit poked by some piece of the text. You know what I mean?

Well, two things poked me here – and led me to a third. One is how Jesus conducts this conversation. First, yes, he boldly asks for water; but it's only after she responds with surprise that he's talking to her that Jesus tells her what she *could* have had if she'd noticed who he was – not just that he was a Jew in Samaria, but the Anointed One, the Messiah, Savior of the world. Jesus saying it this way is like telling a

kid that if they'd only asked, they could have had a candy bar. But how could they know you had one to give? Why did Jesus tease her like this?

The other thing that poked me was that Jesus sent her off to get her husband. Now, this is the part of the story where we learn about her past; but he told her to go get him, anyway, even though he knew the truth. There's something very strange going on here, because marriage at this time was much different than what we know today. It was a simple agreement, sometimes the occasion for a party (as John tells us in the story of the wedding at Cana two chapters before), but actually sealed by intercourse. So, how is this man not her husband? Not because she's "living with him," as we talk about today – which adds even more mystery to the situation – she seems only to be living in his house: scandalous, but not strictly immoral. She is a survivor, and this is just one of the things she did to survive in a society that left little for people like her to survive on.

But the *real* surprise is that he *sent* her. This is what makes this story a turning point: *she is the first person that the Gospel of John says Jesus sent*. He *sent* her back to her village, *sent* her to bring others to him. Up to now, people have been coming to hear him teach, to be baptized. This woman without a name, with a complicated past, a Samaritan, is the first to be sent out to call others to meet Jesus.

And it's in that sending that he gives her the water he teased her about before: water that never runs dry, that quenches the thirst, that nourishes the soul, that washes her inside and out. That water came to her in *being sent*. Remember, she is the first one to be sent; the first “sent one” – in Greek, a term that becomes our word “apostle.”

Which brings us back to the water. We all know he’s talking about water for her spirit, not literal water; but how else do you describe something so precious, so absolutely necessary except by relating it to the stuff of life itself?

The search for life anywhere other than here on earth is focused on finding what? Water. Water is the one non-negotiable requirement for life as we know it. The most common thing on our planet, it still holds mysteries for science. Water is fascinating: it is the only thing I know of that expands when it freezes, so that lakes don’t freeze from the bottom up and kill all the life in them; water is the one substance that manages to give us the majority of our bodies’ composition – somewhere north of 50%, as much as 75%. It stays liquid over a surprising temperature range, has a wonderful surface tension and cohesion that makes it condense well, and is a terrific solvent, which means it dissolves other things easily and is a great cleaner. Among other things, it cleans out our insides, flushes out the toxic by-products of life.

And we need to keep putting water in, too – as many of you have found out. The problem is that while we can live for a much longer time without food than without water, it's more common to notice our hunger than our thirst. We need to train ourselves to realize our thirst, to take in enough water to keep us healthy.

So – what a great metaphor for the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Life itself, the gift that Jesus offers, gives her – and, over the course of the next few days, the rest of her village.

The Greek word we translate “church” actually means much more: it means “the called-out ones.” That’s literally what the people of this Samaritan village became, long before there ever was a church – called out, by this woman that Jesus sent, called to come and meet this man who just might be the savior of the world. Which is, of course, what they recognize him to be. Look at the last sentence in this passage in your bulletin: “They began their faith journey because of the testimony of the woman beside the well; but when they heard for themselves, they were convinced the One they were hearing was and is God’s Anointed (Messiah), the Liberating King sent to rescue the entire world.”

And now, back to us. Did you know that you’ve been called out? That your faith, your presence here means that you have been, are “sent”?

But sent to do what? Sent to do what the anonymous, unorthodox, scrappy survivor of a woman at the well did: bring others to the well to meet Jesus.

Sharing the Good News of salvation was once defined as “one beggar telling another where to find food.” Well, given this story, perhaps it’s more appropriate to say, being a disciple of Jesus, a believer in Christ, is being sent to help others know two things: first, that they’re thirsty, because they often don’t know it; and second, where to quench their thirst, to irrigate their souls, to fill their lives with the Spirit of God, to be washed clean by the living water of Christ. How will you convince them of their need, their thirst; how will you tell them where to find that water?

And don’t worry if you don’t feel qualified. If there’s one thing the Samaritan woman teaches us about who can do such a task, it’s that being sent, calling others to meet Christ, is not about being worthy of that calling – it’s about being thirsty ourselves.

In the words of one of my favorites, Psalm 63: “O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee. My soul thirsteth after thee, my flesh fainteth for thee, as in a barren and dry land, where no water is. Thus, I have looked for thee in holiness.” (KJV)