

The Gifts of Jesus: Living Water

a sermon

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John 4:5-42

One day, in the days before air-conditioning, in the days before hot and cold indoor running water, a woman was thirsty and she went to a well.

This was not unusual.

She went to the well every day.

This was not unusual.

While there, she met a man.

This was not unusual.

The well was a public place. Men would often stop there for something to drink. There was no “Girls Only. No Boys Allowed” sign posted on the well.

This man, however, asked her for a drink of water.

That was unusual.

Yep, in that culture, it was unusual for a man who was a stranger to strike up conversation with a woman. This just didn’t happen much.

But this wasn’t the only thing that was unusual. Because she could tell — maybe by his facial features, or by his clothing, or by his accent — that this man was not from her village in Samaria, but he was from across the border, either Galilee to the north or, maybe, Judea to the south.

Which meant that he was no friend. Because Samaritans and Jews had long history, bad history, centuries of mistrust and even hatred. And the experience of the Samaritans, as well as this woman, was that the Jews looked down on and treated with scorn all Samaritans, including this woman.

This was not unusual.

But *he* didn’t scorn her. He asks her for a drink, and engages her in conversation.

Like I said: unusual.

In all that unusual-ness, she’s not ready to trust him. Not yet. He could be just messing with her. He could be a threat. So she tells him how odd it is for a Jewish man to ask a Samaritan woman for a drink of water.

But Jesus turns this around, as he often does.

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked *him*, and he would have given *you* living water.”

She doesn’t get it at first. Living water? Who makes that? Does it come in the clear bottle or the blue bottle?

Actually, she thinks that, when Jesus speaks of “living water,” he means what her people usually meant when they used that term: *fresh* water, the kind of water that is flowing rather than stagnant. So she supposes that he’s claiming to have access to a well that is even better than this great well so prized by her community, a well that goes back a thousand years to

their beloved ancestor Jacob. “What, Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well?”

Of course, he *is* greater than Jacob, far greater. Not that she understands that, not yet.

About living water, Jesus offers this first stab at explaining:

“Everyone who drinks of this water” (meaning from the well of Jacob) “will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

Now that sounds good to her! She wants some of this unusual water, a kind of water so satisfying that she’ll never be thirsty again. “If I had some of this water,” she thinks, “I wouldn’t have to keep coming to this well again and again, day after day.”

So then Jesus gives her a task. And this might seem like an interruption, a means of stopping the conversation. It might seem like Jesus’ way of saying, “Okay, I’m done now.” But I think it was instead a way for Jesus to help her understand who he really is and what he means by “living water.”

“Go,” he says. “Call your *husband* and come back.”

Hmm. Where to begin?

There’s something, shall we say, *complicated* about the woman’s situation. It’s hard for her to explain, to anyone, but especially to strangers, whose business it isn’t anyway. So she gives Jesus an answer that is the best she can offer, not entirely complete, but it’ll have to do.

“I have no husband.”

“Yes!” Jesus says. “You’re right to say ‘I have no husband’, because you’ve had five husbands, and the man you have now is not your husband. What you say is true!”

Somehow, Jesus knows this woman’s story, all of it, even though he shouldn’t know any of it. Because of his unusual — no, strike that — *miraculous* insight, he knows

what was obvious and what was hidden,
the public and the private,
the benign and the painful;

he knows her responsibility and her victimization,
he knows her brokenness,
he knows her thirst.

And yet,

Jesus doesn’t correct her.

He doesn’t scold her.

He doesn’t, he really doesn’t here, say to her “Go and sin no more.”

He doesn’t lift up her behavior for condemnation.

He doesn’t describe her sins so we can all have a good old chorus of “hate the sin and love the sinner.”

He doesn’t do any of this.

Sure, she’d had five husbands and was now in a relationship with one who wasn’t her husband. This might be a personal embarrassment, even a social scandal, even something that makes her feel ashamed. But it may also

have everything to do with the limited rights of women in that culture, everything to do with ancient Near East customs or laws surrounding what happens with childless women who suddenly find themselves widowed, and nothing, I tell you *nothing* to do with her own *sin*.

Jesus never mentions “sin.” Why must we?

Jesus never calls her a tramp. Why should we?

Jesus never condemns her behavior, just as he never describes it for us. How can we?

And yet, he offers her living water. Not because she was worse than other people. Not because she was especially bad. He gives her this water because she’s thirsty, *as all human souls are*.

But even more, Jesus gives her living water because this is what he does. This is who he is. He gives living water, and he is the one who gives it. Living water is his special gift.

And as he gives her this living water, this gift of himself, his revelation, his teaching, his Spirit, she knows that she has been

embraced by him,
taught by him,
joined to him;
healed of her brokenness,
quenched of her thirst,
washed of the dust that clings to her soul;
given new perspective,
new purpose,
new gifts;
buried with him,
restored in him,
raised to new life with him.

Because that is his gift of living water.



Our world is so thirsty, so spiritually thirsty. And in its thirst, it is always developing more elaborate forms of thirst-quenching. Yet the thirsting remains, as the attempts to quench the thirsts have instead made them into voracious compulsions.

These thirsts lead to broken relationships, broken dreams, broken lives. Our world is not only thirsty; it is broken. We share in its brokenness.

We are thirsty and we are broken. We are needy and lonely. We don’t truly understand how thirsty we are, nor how deep our brokenness goes. So often, too often, we address those thirsts with elixirs that cannot satisfy, and we seek to repair what is broken with patches that will not hold.

Ultimately, the therapies we reach for are not what we truly seek. They really aren’t.

We seek stability, and we grasp for control.
We desire love, and we grab for the erotic.
We yearn for beauty, and we hunt for novelty.
We long for comfort, and we reach for alcohol.
We crave security, and we stockpile weapons.

None of these satisfy, not really. Not one of them really is *it*, the magic draft
that fully satisfies the thirst,
that puts the soul at rest,
that quiets the heart from its quest.

Some of us know this, of course. Some of us know that our thirsts are persistent and not easily quenched. Certainly not by what we find in our grasp, nor out of our own humanity will we ever unearth the resources that bring true rest. No amount of money, or time, or friends, or food, or sex, or work, or play ... will bring us what we truly seek.

And that is because, at the base of it all, we thirst for *God*. That's right. We thirst for God.

All those other forms of thirst, of emptiness, of lack, of incompleteness, they are *stand-ins* for our thirst for God. And poor stand-ins, at that. We focus on them because we're afraid to admit the truth: that our thirst is deeper than we can ever reach and more extensive than we can ever quench, and all our attempts to slake our thirst with things other than God do nothing for our thirst but instead make it worse.



Jesus came into the world to quench our thirst. He came to give us living water, which is his very self. He offers to us himself, his thirst quenching self,

so we may know ourselves
and know God;
so we may know that we thirst
and why we thirst
and for whom we truly thirst;
so we may know *him*,
who fills us with his Spirit,
and instructs us in his way,
and welcomes us into his presence,
and gives us a share in his work,
and in all this quenches our thirst.

He offers us his living water, so that in him we may have that constant refreshment which alone can fill us and alone can satisfy us.

Jesus offered this to the woman at the well. He offers it, also, to us. He gives us his water because we're thirsty. *As all human souls are.*

And as we receive his gift of this living water, this gift of himself, his revelation, his Spirit, we know that we have been

embraced by him,
taught by him,
joined to him;
healed of our brokenness,
quenched of our thirst,
washed of the dust that clings to our souls;
given new perspective,
new purpose,
new gifts;
buried with him,
restored in him,
raised to new life with him.

Friends, let us joyfully receive Christ's gift of living water.