

Michelle James
3rd Sunday in Lent
24 February 2008
“I Thirst”
John 4: 5-42

One of the nice things about living in a small town is that everyone knows each other. One of the problems about living in a small town is that everyone *knows* each other! There’s not much to hide, and often times, folks know your history and your business, sometimes before you even know it yourself!

We can be reasonably sure that this Samaritan woman whom Jesus met at the well was a woman whose history as well as her business was known to others. You may know that this woman’s reputation was somewhat questionable. All the women in Sychar would have come up to Jacob’s well early that morning before all the hustle and bustle of the day got under way. They needed the water from the well for breakfast, washing, drinking, for everything that happened in their small town, and if they waited too long, it would be too hot and too late. So the women met at the well each day and exchanged their pleasantries as well as the latest gossip from around town. It was probably about the only time that the women had together.

Our woman didn’t arrive first thing in the morning like the other women. We gather then, that this woman was probably the *subject* of some of that gossip exchanged earlier in the day. We know from reading our text this morning that this woman has been through five husbands already, and is currently seen in the company of one who has not made her an honest woman. She has either been widowed five times, divorced five times, or some combination thereof. Good grief! She can really give a guy a run for his money! And perhaps her latest fella is wiser than the rest and has decided it is safer to keep a little distance from her.

Whatever the case, drawing water at noon means that she will avoid the morning gathering at the well and probably the shepherds and other travelers who would have stopped by as they made their way out of town. I think it is safe to say that she is not among Sychar’s social elite.

Not only that, but we know that Jews were not allowed to associate with those from Samaria. It would make them unclean, unable to participate in the worship life of their community, to do business, or even to associate with friends and family. They would be required to perform purifying rituals and get clearance from the priests or rabbis before they could re-enter community life. So it would be very inconvenient and socially unacceptable to associate with one of *those* Samaritans, and a woman, no less!

So this encounter at the well was quite an eyebrow raiser. Jesus shouldn’t have been traveling through Samaria in the first place, but since he was, he should have just kept to himself, eyes down, no contact with the locals. But it was a hot day, and after walking in the sun all morning, Jesus stopped at the well to rest. Wouldn’t it be great if he only had a bucket to lower into the well for a nice, cool drink?

Enter said woman – Samaritan, female, ill-repute. Strike 3! She’s out. Just ignore her, Jesus. She’ll draw her water and go away. Just keep your eyes down, step away, and you’ll be okay.

But he was thirsty. And it was such a simple request.

Who knew it would lead to such an incredible exchange and the amazing evangelization of an entire town!

If we follow the course of their conversation and the progression of events at the well that day, we might be surprised to see what really happened.

It all started when Jesus asked for a drink of water – he was thirsty.
She called him a Jew and questioned his judgment.

He told her she was thirsty and said he could quench her thirst.
She called him “Sir” and asked for his water.

He told her she would never be thirsty again and spoke of her sins.
She called him a prophet and spoke about God.

He revealed to her his identity and spoke of true worship and discipleship.
She called him Messiah and went to share the good news of her encounter with Christ.

As the two spoke of thirst, their conversation moved from the ordinary, day-to-day, physical need for water to a conversation of deep, intimate, spiritual thirst she had as a result of her sin. She, aware of her sin yet oblivious to her deep thirst, came face to face with the Living Water and almost missed it.

I wonder how many times we too, come face to face with the Living Water and almost miss it. We are thirsty, all of us – some of us in our sin, some of us in our fear, some in our loneliness or addiction or anxiety, and some of us by our success, or our class, or our situation or our past. We feel trapped in or by our need, and we thirst.

Here in the church, we know there is much need right outside our doors – friends, colleagues, family members, neighbors, and those whom we know by sight or circumstance alone – people who have lost, people who are alone, people who are sick or poor, those who are in debt, those who have received bad news or pay cuts, those who have too little, and those who have too much.

All of us are thirsty, aren't we? Each in our own way. Each of us has some hidden sin, hidden pain, hidden secret that we keep buried as deep down inside as we can. We hope that we won't be known by others in this secret, sinful, hurtful, burdensome way. We smile and nod, we exchange pleasantries and the latest gossip, hoping that by looking at others, talking about others and their problems, we will divert attention from our own problems. We try to quench our thirst with the water of this world – with drugs or alcohol, with money, with made-up stories, with work or by running away.

But sometime, when we least expect it, when we sneak about in the cover of darkness like Nicodemus, or take our daily walk to the well in the busy-ness of the noontime hour, we come face to face with the God who made us, and we are exposed. There is nothing which remains hidden in the eyes of the One who holds out the cup to us. Our need, our thirst is known, and if we are willing, we can have a drink of the Living Water.

What would it feel like to take a drink from this well? What would it feel like to be liberated from our pain, our sickness, our loneliness, our anger, our sin, our grief, our addictions, our poverty, our struggles – from all the situations which choke us and make us hunger and thirst more deeply? What would it feel like to be liberated from the fear and shame of it all, to run with wild abandon, to leave our water jar at the well and run to tell others of our freedom?

What would it feel like to bring someone else to the well so that they too might be liberated, their thirst quenched by the water that only Christ offers?

Our Lenten stories confront us with our weakness, in the wilderness with Satan, under cover of darkness with Nicodemus, at the well with the Samaritan woman.

As we journey to Jerusalem with Jesus, there are several stops we make along the way. At each stop, we are invited to examine the meaning of the text, the work of Christ, and the need in our own lives. I am struck by the image of the Living Water at this well, even as we make our way to Jesus' death on the cross. As he journeys to his death, he continues to hold out life. His journey, his ministry, begins at the river, in the water. Our journey too, begins in the water. We go down into the water of death in our baptism, and are reborn as new creatures, filled with new life, life that only Christ can give. That has an awfully familiar ring this morning, doesn't it?

Our journey to the cross, to death, is full of the promise of life and the invitation to drink of the Living Water. This is the invitation to lay down our burdens, to leave our water jars at the well and run with all our might to tell others of the goodness of this water. This is the invitation to drink deeply, unashamed, of the water which will become in us a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

Give me a drink of this water for I thirst. Amen.