



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

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Third Sunday in Lent

Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42

Thirsty

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Thirsty. More than a routine morning cup of coffee, or three, or tea. We're talking parched, hot, tired, dry mouth, chapped lips, low energy. Thirsty.

A week ago my son was home on Spring Break. We've talked a lot about ultimate Frisbee ... I used to play and now he started. Wouldn't it be fun to play together? So we joined Rob Bradford and others at Soccer Zone. I warned them I'd be good as a sub. Sure enough I'm on the team without one. I just tried to keep up, literally, with everyone else at least 10-15 years younger. It was fun for 15 minutes. Then 45 minutes of hell! Suzanne was glad I didn't end up in hospital. And I guzzled water for days!

Thirsty. What comes to your mind? Gardening in summer heat? Running, biking, tennis? Skiing in dry winter air? Hiking in the sunny desert southwest? So nervous at an interview the inside of your mouth sticks together and it's hard to simply form the words you want to say. Maybe lying in hospital, or waking up in the middle of the night after the furnace has been blowing. Feeling sick with fever, sitting in front of a fire, or simply realizing you forgot to drink all day?

As Ann, Kathleen and I talked through pastoral needs this week concern about dehydration arose for one of our members. It may be the simplest most basic yet greatest health concerns from infants to adults of all ages. Water. 60 percent or more of our actual body. We literally physically can't live long without it. We are inherently thirsty.

Hebrews on Exodus through the desert, Jesus and the woman at the well ... they seek H₂O. And these stories are really about the Holy One without whom we cannot live. What truly nourishes us for a good life and a strong faith? What makes our hearts thirsty for God, for a libation of love, a gulp of grace?

As John tells this story, it's about one woman individually, and about thirst shared in community. Now some people picture the Samaritan woman with dubious, promiscuous moral character. As if, the redder her lipstick, darker her mascara and shorter her skirt, the more powerful is God's saving love.¹ Maybe. And if people like us who've known such experiences find in her a kindred spirit and hear good news, then thanks be to God. But back then women had little power to live so loose and seductive. Historically, it'd be likely she was a victim in a time when men could divorce and abandon women. Or maybe most probably, her five husbands were brothers, one marrying her after the previous one died. It's religious custom to ensure a vulnerable, powerless, penniless widow isn't simply cast aside by society. Imagine her—cycles of grief; wary, worn out, wondering what tragedy could possibly happen next? Thirsty ... for real love, real life.

She goes to the well meeting basic needs for another day, for herself and other family or friends. She goes where ancestors have gone for ages, yet she's never seen this Jewish man before. Talking with him violates all kinds of cultural rules. You see, Samaritans and Jews were intimate enemies. Intimate, that is, cousins back through many generations of ancient Israelites, descendants of Jacob. Enemies in that Samaritans intermarried with conquerors over the centuries. So to Jews, they're less pure ethnically and religiously. Disputes, hostility, and prejudice simmered. We don't know the woman's name or how she dressed. We know her nationality. When Jesus greets this Samaritan woman, she tastes all the acrimony and conflict over true faith, worship places and practices, scriptural rules and traditions. So do John's

listeners. According to faithful Jews like Jesus, this foreigner, heretic, unclean, woman, married five times, arriving at noon after everyone else is as low as one can go socially, politically, religiously, culturally. How might she, like you and me ... be thirsty for living water?

She's come to the community watering hole to quench surface thirst. And Jesus offers to quench her thirst for a deeper life ... maybe in ways she couldn't even conceive possible. When they're done talking she's left her water jug. She's filled with something even better to share. You see, in numerous other Bible stories, boy meets girl at the well (like Jacob and Rachel, for example). Girl runs home to tell family. Next thing you know, they're married. Except this time, it's not just the woman. Again, it's about a whole community. In John's gospel, this nameless, foreign, heretic, hard-luck powerless woman is the first evangelist. She gets the whole community to wed their hearts spiritually to Jesus as the Messiah-Savior. Thirst quenched.

John tells this story to help us join that community; to spiritually wed our hearts and lives to God in Christ, as well. Friends, aren't we as thirsty in spirit as our bodies for water? We try to quench our thirst for a full life in as many ways as we have coffee shops and tea boutiques and beverage aisles filling the grocery store. We sip and savor family relations, health and exercise. We swig success at work, accomplishments, and complements. We swallow expectations for the way our home looks or earning lots of money. We gulp the latest political news, or serving some cause that captures our hearts. All of this can taste good. It can be part of life flavored with joy and satisfaction. And yet, like water to fill the woman's jug, if we depend on these thirst-quenchers alone as the source of our meaning and purpose, we'll always be thirsty for more. Family conflicts arise. Jobs change. Health problems happen. Money comes and goes. Political winds shift. And we just might wonder is God among us or not? We need a deeper nourishing source of life and love. Jesus offers us a Sacred Spring

welling up inside and among us—a relationship of grace like an ever-flowing clear-pure stream from the Holy Sustainer of All Life. Jesus promises that this Source will always flow no matter how anxious or consumed with success we feel. No matter where we find ourselves at home, in hospital to desert wilderness. Jesus meets the woman at the well, and he says, “I am the real well you’re looking for.”

Friends, I believe the living water God’s love in Jesus nurtures true abundant life better than anything else on offer. We could think and talk about many personal ways we might feel a bit dehydrated right now. As I imagine us at Massah and Meribah or Jacob’s well in Samaria, I’m drawn to the wider context of these stories—to our community and country. Don’t we know something about the bickering, quarreling, complaining spirit that gripped people on their Exodus journey? Little sign of hope amid the harsh, life-threatening desert climate—rock-hard, barren, unforgiving. They’ve been wandering trying to find their way for a long time. I’m not surprised and won’t criticize Hebrews for their bickering and complaining. Given human nature this response would be expected. Eroding patience. Vision of the Promised Land seems a mirage. Whatever side of the cultural-political aisle we sit on in our time, haven’t we come to Massah and Meribah?

Or as we meet Jesus and the woman at the well, for you and me, good and faithful and imperfect as we all are ... who would be Samaritans in our day? Democrats? Republicans? ISIS? Fundamentalist Christians? Immigrants? The wealthiest fraction of one percent? Maybe we’re Samaritans in someone else’s eyes. You see, we humans can like to have enemies. Jesus loves ... to make them friends. Yes, in and beyond how each of us may be spiritually parched, these stories are about all of us thirsty together. Samaritans and Jews fought about where and how to worship. It’s a polarizing religious and political issue as divisive as any in our day.

Jesus tries to draw them and us beyond discord to the spirit and truth of relationship with God, the Living Water he offers. Friends, as I listen to the news, to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, to Facebook posts and e-mail links; as I listen to you and the concerns of your personal lives, and our society you share. Truth be told, I understand weariness. I thirst like the woman at the well, Hebrews on the desert Exodus. Psalm 42 (verses 1-2, 4) echoes in my mind.

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my heart longs for you, O God.

I thirst for you, the living God.

When shall I know you are near me? ...

That's the longing I feel. The desire to be filled with Jesus' love.

These things I remember, as I pour out my heart:

how I went with many others into God's house,

with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

Friends, that's the promise, the affirmation of trust in Jesus Christ that I believe is our greatest and truest hope. I don't know how we're going to make it to the Promised Land. I don't know how our society like that Samaritan village will all be converted in God's love. Truth be told, sometimes it's hard for me to find strength for another day, another news report, another conversation. Yet I believe, wherever we sit, whatever we say, we must seek together Jesus' way, truth, and life. What's it like? When that spring of living water wells up what do we taste? What brings us true deep and lasting joy? What quenches our thirst for meaning, purpose and peace more deeply than passing surface pleasures?

At the wellspring of Jesus we savor the steadfast love of God sweeter than all our insecurities, which just keeps flowing no matter how many our imperfections and poor decisions. Drink up, dear friends, and drink deeply.

At the wellspring of Jesus, we savor listening with compassion to friends and strangers alike. Without fear or condemnation or defensiveness no matter how

heated the moments, we discover new insights and inspiration beyond whatever prejudice or ignorance we knew before. Drink deeply, dear friends.

At the wellspring of Jesus, we meet people wherever they are on life's journey however good or hard it's been amid whatever apparent failures and deficiencies according to social standards; and we savor the goodness and possibility in them even beyond assumptions and rules of culture or religion. Drink deeply, dear friends.

At the wellspring of Jesus, we savor forgiveness when disappointed in ourselves or distanced by hurts in relationship with someone else. We savor service to others beyond our desires—healing, caring, creating abundance in community like Jesus' miracles with the blind and lame and thousands of hungry people beside the sea. Drink deeply ... there's nothing better.

We savor real hope not seduced by however good life seems now or despite all evidence to the contrary. We savor comfort amid our grief and wariness about what may come next. We savor courage when our strength withers just running to keep up and end up exhausted. We savor true joy through all the moments of pleasure in a garden or persistent stress and physical pain. Drink deeply, dear friends, from this eternal source, ever with us.

We receive diversity as a gift. We reflect the light of God's love. We continue discerning God's vision of grace and peace as we try to order our lives and world the way we believe God wants it. Friends, this is the living faith nurtured by the well-spring of Jesus' living water ... here in this sanctuary and throughout our city.

If the Samaritan woman epitomizes and empowers how we drink deeply, I think I might know her name. I think she's named Shawn. You see, every week,

without fail there's a cup in our lectern and pulpit filled with water, by our faithful servant Shawn Smith.

What's your bucket like? How do you sip or slurp or gulp this living water of God's Spirit? Sometimes we have powerful spiritual experiences something like my son marching drum corps last summer. It's more like running constantly in step, while blowing a trumpet or tuba ... at worst for a couple of weeks in the July heat of Florida. He loved it. That was living about as abundantly as it gets. The glory of God in a human being fully alive! And forget cups, they guzzled water by the two-gallon jug multiple times per day! Such emotionally and spiritually gushing experiences of life are wonderful when they come to us.

And of course, we know routines of life aren't always that glorious. We might like living water of God's love to be as easy as our wonderful water coolers around the church, or like a tap at home we can turn on to fill our glass. And we know some of the greatest saints of our faith, like you and me, have often struggled with God's absence. Maybe it seems this Holy Spring Jesus promises is more like what sustained the community of cliff dwellers in Mesa Verde National Park ages ago. That arid environment receives some minuscule amount of rain each year. And when we climbed up ladders way back inside under the cliff, tour guides pointed out small holes in rock floor, with channels and then small pooling places about the size of a soup ladle. They estimate it provided life for a community of thousands.

If you see me around here, friends, I'm probably drinking from one of two mugs. Both are gifts from beloved church members. A small mug with a peace frog decked out like the biblical Joseph's coat of many colors. And three words: "body, soul, spirit." Our Sunday morning deacons coffee—body, heart, soul—tastes pretty good in this one. And another huge one with a yellow sun radiating above words proclaim: "It's all good." This one's usually full of water

4-5 times a day. Well, friends, it's not always all good. And I don't always feel full of peace. But that's what we seek. That's what we sip and slurp and gulp and hope in any way we can.

A final image for our more parched realities and the possibility of living water in our community might be the fountain in Bronson Park. Right now, of course, it's dry. And as I walked by it this week on my way to a meeting, I surveyed the cracks, the concrete broken and fallen off. Yet, the original design remains clear. A Native American and a pioneer an artistic picture of another sort of Exodus journey and its consequences on individuals and our community. At a recent Downtown Clergy meeting we heard about plans to refurbish the park including the fountain, hopefully soon to begin. One presenter remarked about how controversial it's been—the first known piece of public art in our nation to address realities, complexities, tragedies of that piece of our nation's history. One popular observation, the woman presenter said, is that the Native American looks directly at the Pioneer's heart. I can't wait for that fountain to flow again, with people mingling all around, reading on benches, eating lunch, soaking in the sunshine, or catching Pokemon. I can't wait to feel the spray, for me a sign of God's Spirit, as I walk by on a hot, breezy day.

Strike the rock, God says to Moses at Massah and Meribah, and water will come out of it so that the people may drink. The water I give, Jesus said at the well in Samaria, will become a spring in you and me and among us together, gushing up to eternal life. The thirsty woman said, "Sir, fill me with your love, give me this water always."

Thanks be to God.

ⁱ See Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 30.