

“INVITATION TO THE THIRSTY”

Scripture: John 4: 4-37

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I want to read from the Gospel of John. I'm not going to read all of the verses that I put down as the text but I will be referring to the story. I am going to read the verses 1 through 7 right now and then I will refer to another portion of the story later on in the sermon.

1 The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, 2 although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. 3 When the Lord learned of this, he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. 4 Now he had to go through Samaria. 5 So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. 7 When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" 8 (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

I'll stop there for right now.

*Water, water everywhere, and all the boards did shrink.
Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink.*

I learned that back in the ice age when I was in the eight grade, I think it was. We had to learn those lines from the Rime of the Ancient Mariner, which is an epic poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge about an old man and the sea. Those words he spoke are true: a person can be in the middle of the ocean with all those millions of gallons of water and there not be a drop of water to drink. Drinking ocean water would make ones thirst even more intense because of the salt content. Or I could have quoted an more contemporary song that Kathy Mattea sings that I just discovered this week: "Standing Knee Deep in a River, Dying of Thirst." We can be standing knee deep in a river dying of thirst. Water is essential to life. A person can live without food for quite some time because of the body fat, which means that some of us, in particular me, could live quite a long time before I would die from lack of food. You know my saying, "Blessed are the Methodists for they shall be known for their much eating," and it looks like I've been a pretty good United Methodist.

Well, a person can't live very long without water before the body begins to dehydrate and electrolyte balances begin to go askew and certain body functions essential to life begin to deteriorate and death comes on pretty quickly. Water is essential to plant life. We all know that a well watered garden is going to thrive, but if you don't water that garden very often or if you fail to water it, especially when it is dry, the garden is going to dry up and you are not going to have a very good yield from what you have planted.

Water is a precious commodity. It is readily available. We go to the kitchen sink and turn on the spigot; we go to the bathroom and turn on the shower and we take it for granted **that we are**

going to always have water running out of those spigots. But there are places in our world, even in our own country, where water is not so readily available, where there is still the daily ritual of walking miles to a water hole to fill up a big container to carry it those many miles back home. We just don't realize how blessed we are to have the use of running water in our homes.

The need for water figures prominently in this gospel lesson I read for you. Jesus and His disciples, as I read, are on their way to Galilee from Judea and the text says that Jesus had to go through Samaria. The footnote of my Bible says that the necessity of this detour through Samaria lay in Jesus' mission, not in the geography of the area. Jews often avoided going through Samaria by crossing the Jordan and traveling up on the east side to Galilee. And you know, there was the ages old conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans. Jews hated the Samaritans because of the intermarriage of the Israelites with the people that were left behind when the northern kingdom people were exiled and Gentiles were brought into the land by the Assyrians. In Jewish thinking, Samaritans were low-life half-breeds who had polluted the race by intermarrying with the Gentiles, so no self-respecting Jew wanted to have anything to do with Samaritans, much less travel through the region of Samaria. But as I have said, the necessity of Jesus' trip through that area was because of His mission. There was a need there that Jesus could fill. Jesus was always there, wherever He needed to be, just when He needed to be there. Just like that old song we used to sing in the Baptist Church says:

*Just when I need Him, Jesus is near,
Just when I falter, just when I fear;
Ready to help me, ready to cheer,
Just when I need Him most.*

When Jesus spoke to the woman and said, "Will you give me a drink?" she was startled. She was surprised that a Jewish man would speak to her, a Samaritan and a woman. No self-respecting Jew would consider using any vessel that belonged to or had been touched by a Samaritan, for if he did he would be considered ceremonially unclean and he would also be considered ceremonially unclean for talking to a Samaritan. And also for talking to a woman, for women in those days were looked down upon. They were considered possessions by the men who married them. They had no rights apart from their marriage and so the woman was very surprised and said, "*You — a Jew, a man — ask me — a Samaritan, a woman — to give you a drink of water?*"

10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

Well, the woman's response to this indicates that she was thinking of literal water and she didn't understand how Jesus was going to get the water since He had nothing to draw it in and besides, the well was very deep. The woman seemed to be confused because she kept thinking about the literal water of Jacob's well and yet, here centuries later, was someone, a man, asking for a drink and saying that he could give something better than the water from Jacob's well. What could be better than the water from Jacob's well? Jesus began to explain that whoever drank from the water of Jacob's well would be thirsty again. Surely she could have understand this. She had been coming out here day after day, after day, and she was still thirsty. So it is with the wells of the

world from which we all drink, and drink, and drink with a thirst that can never be satisfied. We seek after the pleasures and programs the world designs for us and come away, only to return again, and again, and again, to more and bigger and better things. Like the rich fool, we build more and bigger barns to store more and better things in an attempt to have what we think will be a better, more successful, happier life, only to realize that this water from the wells of life doesn't slake our thirst.

The woman was still thinking literally and wanting this water so she wouldn't have to come back to this well again. See, the text says that she came at an odd time of the day, probably around noon time, the hottest part of the day, instead of coming in the early morning or in the late afternoon when the sun was not quite so powerful. She came, probably, to avoid the knowing glances and whispered comments the other women made about her. She thought if she could get *this* water she would be set for life. But she did not realize that Jesus was speaking of spiritual matters. Because she had earthbound ears and earthbound eyes and mostly an earthbound soul, she was prevented from having any kind of understanding of spiritual things.

"Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming back to this well."

There is a sudden change of subject here. Jesus says, "Go call your husband."

The woman says, "I have no husband."

Jesus says, "You got that right. You've had five husbands and that man you are living with now is not your husband."

Can you imagine the surprise on this woman's face? How could this man possibly know all this? What was his reason for talking to her like this? The point is, that this woman would not receive this living water, this gift of the Holy Spirit, this abundant life that Jesus wanted to give her, until she was willing to admit to herself that she needed something more than just another husband, or just another relationship, or just another job, or just another home, or whatever the things are that humankind think will fill that God-shaped void St. Augustine says we have in our hearts. She needed to realize that she was a sinner, in need of repentance and forgiveness of her sins. Jesus knew about her sinful life and He was leading her step by step to see for herself what she needed to do. This woman had to admit to herself, just as we all have to admit to ourselves, that we need to fill the void in our souls with a close personal relationship with Jesus Christ. But she wasn't ready for that. She wasn't ready, just like we are never ready to look inside ourselves and see what's really there. So she began a ploy like a lot of people use. You know, there is that old couplet:

*When in trouble, when in doubt,
Run in circles; scream and shout.*

Change the subject; start an argument; do anything to keep the subject to keep from getting up close and personal. So she began a discussion about the proper place for worship. She mentioned Mount Gerizim, which all the Samaritans had decided was the proper place for worship, all the while knowing that the Jews believed that worship should take place in Jerusalem. Jesus didn't ignore her statement, but He took it to a deeper level.

He said, *"Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.*

The woman must have begun to realize that this was not an ordinary person who was talking to her.

She said *"I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."* Then Jesus declared, *"I who speak to you am he."*

In using the words, *I am*, Jesus was announcing to her the startling truth that the One who was speaking to her was the Messiah for whom she had been looking and that He also was God Himself. As that source I read said, Jehovah of the Old Testament is Jesus of the New Testament.

About that time the disciples came back from their trip to the village to shop for food. But the story says that none of them, even though they may have been surprised to see Him talking to a Samaritan woman, none of them asked Him why He was talking with her. The woman left her water pot and went into the village to tell the people there to come out and see this man who had told her all the things she had ever done. "Could this be the Christ?" she asked them.

The people in the village knew the woman's reputation. Most probably they were startled because there was bound to be a change in her countenance. She had tuned her eyes upon Jesus to look full in His wonderful face. And the things of earth had grown strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. I know from personal experience that if you ever do this you will never be the same.

William Barkley says that this woman was staggered at the intimate knowledge Jesus had of her heart and life and she wanted to share the change He had made in her life, so she ran back into the village where she had been avoided and looked down upon and sneered at. This desire to share her discovery had killed any feeling of shame for her past and she went to tell her discovery. No doubt her first instinct was to say, "Look at what I was. Look at what I am now. This is what Christ has done for me."

Now she just as easily could have picked up the water pot and trudged back into the village to her home to experience, again and again, the isolation she had suffered constantly because of her status there. But she chose to accept God's free gift of grace and she ran to tell others. We are told that many Samaritans came out to where Jesus was and that He stayed there two more days teaching and preaching the love of God. And many Samaritans believed in Him for themselves, not just because of this woman's witness, but for themselves. She went and told them and they came to see for themselves what Christ could do for them.

This is the third Sunday at Lent. The purple alter parements are in place and we have seen them before during the time of Advent. Where the purple of Advent season signifies the time when we look outward in anticipation of the birth of the babe of Bethlehem — and upward in expectation of His return as the Lord of Glory — the purple for Lent signifies a more somber contemplation of why the Babe came: To become the full, sufficient and complete sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, as the old Methodist Communion liturgy puts it. Lent is the season when we look inward in examination of our own soul and heart to see where we need to renew our commitment to Christ, where we need to shore up our prayer life and our Bible study and, yes, our giving. For we took vows at Church membership in which we promised to support this Church, the United Methodist Church, through our prayers, through our presence, and our participation, which means our gifts and service, and that means the giving of God's tithes and our offerings. It's a time when we consider our willingness to reach out into our community and our world to find the places to take the light of Christ's love to the dark corners of the world, to the lonely, to the disadvantaged, to the marginalized people like the Samaritan woman. We need to find ways to bring new people into our Church, yes, but we also need to seek to bring back those members who, for whatever reason, have fallen through the cracks and don't come anymore. We need to seek to minister to all sorts and conditions of humanity — to the least, the last and the lost, the people nobody wants to be seen with, much less talk to. We need to follow the example of this Samaritan woman to go and tell, "This is what I was; this is what I am; this is the good thing that Christ Jesus has done for me."

Chuck Swindoll prefaces his teaching on this text about the woman at the well with these words:

"Jesus offered living water to a sun-parched woman at a Samaritan well, water that all humanity thirsts for."

Professor Zane Hodges discusses this longing in his excellent book, *The Hungry Inherit*, when he says:

Love, success, wealth, fame — these are but a few of the countless springs at which men had stooped to drink, only to rise from them to find that they offered no lasting inward satisfaction, no enduring personal fulfillment. But His water was different; it could accomplish a miracle. The one who drank from it was secure from thirst, not merely for time, but for eternity as well. So vital, so transforming was such a drink that in the innermost being of the man who drank it, there was created an inexhaustible fountain of life. The waters of that hidden inner spring could not run dry; they could not be stanchd; they virtually leaped up to produce the surpassing experience of eternal life.

Such was the experience of the Samaritan woman in John 4, and such is the offer to all who come to Christ. With one sip of faith, the deepest thirst is quenched, and what was once a wilderness of rocks is transformed into an oasis overflowing with abundant life.

Now don't think that you are not worthy. Probably the Samaritan woman at first glance

thought, this man is offering me something that I am not worthy to have because of my past. That is just not so in God's economy. Everybody is worthy because God loves everybody. God so loved the world, the whole world — the red, the yellow, the black, the white, they all are precious in His sight. The street person, the executive in the bank, the insurance agent, the teacher, the housewife, the child, He loves us all and that makes us worthy. And there is a line of a hymn that I want to close this with:

*Let not conscience make you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness He requireth
Is to feel your need of him.*

In the name of the Father, because of the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Lord Jesus, we need You. Amen