

1 - Sermon, March 7, 1999

Text: John 4:5-26

Title: "Give Me a Drink"

Central Idea: We are changed by Christ in the simplest things

1. A Well
2. A Woman
3. Conversation/Communion

A cake decorator was asked by a bride to inscribe I John 4:18 on a wedding cake: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." Unfortunately, the decorator didn't know the Bible very well. So, instead of putting the words from I John 4:18 on the cake, the decorator wrote the words from the Gospel of John 4:18. They read like this: "You have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband." The bride and groom did not see the cake until their reception, as they were getting ready to cut it.

We're looking today at the story from the Gospel of John which contains those words. It is a story about a woman at a well. It is a story in which a Samaritan woman discovers Jesus, and claims a savior -- in simple conversation with him.

1. A Well

A public well was an ordinary thing in the time of Jesus. The well was probably a deep hole in the ground with some sort of a stone covering - perhaps a slot just big enough to let down your leather water bag and pull it up full of cool water. A cover over the well would also prevent animals from getting into it, and cut down on evaporation.

A well was a very important thing in the semi-arid middle east. Water is not easy to get there -- every drop is precious. Every ounce of water had to be carried home -- making it even more precious.

A well was also a place of meeting -- really the most natural place to meet a stranger outside of a town. Jacob met Rachel at a well. It was probably a community gathering place. Water had to be gathered once or twice a day, so why not make a party of it?

2. A Woman

And so, along comes a woman who meets Jesus at the well. We don't know much about her. In the past, I've looked at this woman, coming alone, figuring that she was alone because she didn't have friends. I've figured that she was a woman of loose morals because she'd had five husbands and was now living with a man not her husband. But maybe not.

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There is an Old Testament law that says that if a man dies, his brother is *required* to marry the widow, and try to have children by her: When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband's brother to her, and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. (Deuteronomy 25:5-6, NRSV).

This was perhaps a woman who had had a very tough time, her many husbands dying - and maybe living with another brother who refused to marry her lest he die, too!

In this passage, the woman's character is not the issue. Jesus accepted her. That is the message. No matter what her circumstances, Jesus accepted her -- he did not judge her, but accepted her.

As is the case in much of the Gospel of John, there are several layers of meaning. There is both a literal and a symbolic. And one thing we can be sure of is this Samaritan woman represents something. She is a woman, and a Samaritan -- both positions of low social status. She represents those who are rejected by society, looked on as lowly, and yet come to know Christ as well as anyone, and even do great work of spreading the word.

It is hard for us to imagine what social barriers those were. First of all, women and men did not talk in public. It was just not done. And second, Samaritans and Jews were enemies. There was a long history here, like between Serbs and Croats. Why is it that neighboring countries become enemies? I suppose that familiar scapegoats are easier.

The average Jewish man would have gone out of his way to avoid meeting a Samaritan woman. Jesus didn't. He started talking to her.

It's incredible grace, incredible hospitality.

3. A Conversation / Communion

Their conversation started by Jesus asking for a drink of water. It was a simple request. But it astonished the woman. She was surprised that he'd have anything to do with her. But it was a great conversation starter. Whenever we ask a stranger for something, it is uncomfortable we become vulnerable, open to rejection. Asking for something can be a moment of weakness when God's strength enters in.

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And then there took place one of those multiple-layer things that go on in the Gospel of John. There was a misunderstanding of what the words "living water" mean. The words for living water in Greek can mean either *running or flowing* water, or it can mean *life-giving* water.

When Jesus said he can give her living water and said she will never thirst again, he was talking about the Holy Spirit as life-giving water, which will always be with her. Later on in John we find these words:

Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. John 7:38-39 (NIV)

But the woman, instead of thinking about spiritual water, was thinking about running water. You see, a well was a good thing -- But a flowing stream in a dry land was even more beautiful. Running water was also understood in relation to the ritual purity baths that were common in Jewish practice. These baths were always taken in "living (moving) water," not water from a well or cistern. Spring water was also cold and fresh, and less liable to be polluted, so it was valued highly.

There's a point to this misunderstanding between the meanings of living water. The point is that the woman didn't at first get who Jesus was, or what he could do in her life. But, eventually, she came to understand that he was the Messiah.

We as readers, are supposed to see that the same is true for us. We don't get it at first, even when we think we do. But over the long haul we come more and more to understand Christ as Lord of our lives -- and the Holy Spirit as living water to us.

Later on in the story, the disciples came back, and Jesus started talking about food in the same way. Jesus talked about his food being to do the work of the father, while the disciples are worrying about physical food. The disciples don't get what Jesus means, either.

Now here's water and food, talked about together. And you have to wonder if, in this deeply symbolic Gospel of John, Jesus isn't referring to Holy Communion. For communion is where we share bread and cup -- food and drink -- that are physical reminders of a spiritual grace. When we see the bread and cup, we see the body and blood of Christ, available to us spiritually. Jesus offers this food and drink to us.

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When we eat of the bread and cup, we are reminding ourselves of the Holy Spirit (water), and of doing the Father's will (food).

Communion is where we come around the same table, drink from the same well, share of the same spirit -- even though we don't understand it all as Christ would want us to -- even though we don't all understand at the same level.

Communion is where we reflect on how Jesus Christ came to do his Father's will, and pray that we may be able to be faithful in doing God's will as well as we can.

Communion is where, like the woman at the well, we are changed by Christ through a drink - or an almost drink. We drink deep of the Spirit - of the Love of God, and we are satisfied.

Communion is one place where we hope to have an encounter with the living savior, just like the woman at the well had. And we hope that we may experience the love of God so much that we rush out, leaving our water jug behind, to tell of this wonderful God in our own words.

I'd like us to close with the words of the song, "Fill My Cup, Lord," which refers to this passage. It came out of the Methodist youth camping program in the Florida Conference (Leesburg).

VERSE 1:

G **D**
Like the woman at the well I was seeking
D7 **G**
For things that could not satisfy;
G7 **C**
And then I heard my Savior speaking:
D **G**
"Draw from My well that never shall run dry."

CHORUS:

G **D**
Fill my cup, Lord, I lift it up, Lord!
Am **D** **G**
Come and quench this thirsting of my soul;
G7 **C**
Bread of heaven, feed me 'til I want no more-
D **G**
Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole!

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So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "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." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

(John 4:5-26, NRSV).