

Sermon for Sunday, March 19, 2017

THIRST QUENCHER

We take water for granted. It's plentiful, it's clean, and it's readily available by just turning on the tap. That someone figured out that they could get us to pay for it by putting it into plastic bottles and selling it in soda machines is a marvel of marketing ingenuity. Bottled water has now surpassed soda in total sales. Go figure! Personally, I still go to the drinking fountain. That free stuff tastes just fine to me.

But in much of the world good drinking water is not so easily attained. In LaGonave, Haiti, which is an island just off of Port of Prince where I've been several times on mission trips, getting water is a chore. The only running water is in a stream that comes tumbling down from the hills. For years if you wanted a drink of water, you had to trudge half-way up the hill to get it, about a quarter mile. Now, at least, because of Christian ministry there, the stream has been captured enough to provide a number of wells in the village. But still, to get a drink of water, or to have water for cooking or cleaning, you have to take your bucket to one of the wells and fill it up. It's a daily routine there. Every morning and every evening the villagers fill their buckets at the well. It's also become the place where everyone meets, where news and gossip is exchanged, where deals are made, and where the social fabric of the community is maintained. The well is the center of community life, and it's quite lively there, usually bustling with activity.

Go to the well at noon, however, and there's no one there, no one. It's too hot and people are busy with the day's activities.

It was at noontime that Jesus sat down by Jacob's well just outside of Sychar, a city in Samaria. He was tired, and not just of walking. His ministry in neighboring Judea had gone exceedingly well, in fact so well that he was attracting more converts than John the Baptist. But in doing so he had also attracted the attention of the Pharisees who had always been hostile to John. Now, they were after him. Normally, to get back to Galilee, Jesus and his disciples would have avoided going through Samaria, which was enemy territory. But now, going through enemy territory actually seemed like the safer route. The Pharisees wouldn't follow them into Samaria, and it was also nine hours shorter.

Jesus didn't stop at the well because he was thirsty, but because he wanted—no he needed—to be alone. He needed to collect himself and take a moment to renew his spirit. The crowds had drained him. He was anxious about the Pharisees. And though he loved his disciples very much, they were always so full of questions. So he sent them into town to look for some food. Town was the last place he wanted to be right now. At high noon, he knew he was assured of some peace and solitude at the well.

She came to the well to draw water, like she did every day. It was a necessary evil. She needed the water to live, but she didn't need the daily public humiliation. She wished she could have sent a servant, or even a child, but she had neither. God had not blessed her with wealth or with motherhood. In fact, all she had been blessed with—cursed with in truth—was a series of lousy husbands, three of whom divorced her because she was barren, one of whom just got up and left one night, and the other walked away because he didn't like her cooking! The man she was living with at the moment—and she had to live with someone just to survive—wasn't even interested in marrying her. That was just as well, really. What was the point!

But what pained her most was how the townspeople—other women mostly—rubbed salt into her wounds. The furtive glances, the wagging tongues behind her back, the awkward silence when she was near, all told her that she was an outcast. They didn't want to get too close to her lest her curse rub off on them! So she avoided them. At high noon, the hottest part of the day, she was assured of being the only one at the well. If she could get there and back without running into anyone, it would be a good day.

They met at the well, these two, both seeking solace, both wanting to be apart for a bit, both feeling outcast, both aware that they were in enemy territory. Neither one of them was fooled by the other. Jesus knew full well that a woman who came to the well at noon was avoiding her neighbors on purpose. She knew

that a Jew sitting at a Samaritan well in the heat of the day was desperate to go unnoticed. They had a lot in common.

By custom, she is the last person Jesus wants to encounter. Not only is she a woman, but she is also a divorced woman, several times over. She's a woman with a shady past, and she's a Samaritan. Jesus, the Rabbi, ought not to speak with her in public, let alone drink from her Samaritan bucket. She is anathema.

Jesus is the last person on earth she wants to encounter. He's a Rabbi, a holy man, and a prophet who can see right through her. He's also a Jew, and Jews looked down on Samaritans. He was the enemy.

What transpires between these two is nothing short of miraculous. These strangers, these enemies, these weary people, both thirsting for something that eluded them—whose worlds would ordinarily never connect—discover at the well that they need each other. She holds the cup he needs to quench his thirst for ordinary acceptance. He holds the cup she needs to quench her thirst for grace and new life.

Jesus, always the healer, breaks the awkward tension by asking her for a drink from her bucket, since he has no way of getting water for himself from the deep well. But already, he is no longer thinking of himself, but of her; why she is there at noon, and of what he might offer her from his warehouse of divine grace. She's a plucky one, who sensing his insight into the truth of her noontime journey, quickly turns the tables, asking him what he's doing out there at noon himself, a Jew, asking for a drink from a Samaritan woman. She senses his need as much as he senses hers.

What follows is a verbal dance of self-disclosure, of truth-telling, that breaks down the barriers that separate them from each other. She reminds him of what connects them, their ancestor Jacob, at whose well they have met. He reminds her that all barriers are artificial, especially the social ones, and that they shall all be united one day in the worship of God. Faith, the faith in God which both of them share, brings them together, and they conspire to bring new life out of death. The water they offer each other, to quench the thirst of body and soul and to meet each other's need, becomes the spring that gushes up to eternal life.

In the desert at noon, isolation, distrust, anxiety, and thirst give way to a saving relationship. Distance dissolves into mutuality. Enmity dissipates into trust. As each recognizes and embraces the legitimate need of the other, communion is served and community is recreated. The world takes another step toward becoming one with its Creator.

We need God just like we need fresh water to survive. None of us doubt that. But in Jesus Christ, God declares, that for the sake of a saving mutuality and love, and to create the fabric of the community of heaven, God needs us. God needs us to enter into communion with him, as well as with each other. That "Holy Communion" is the spring of water that gushes up to eternal life. It is a saving grace; it is the saving grace. It is Jesus Christ, the Lord, in whom heaven and earth meet. Anyone who partakes of it will never thirst again.

Come, enjoy the feast of communion, which is not limited to our monthly celebration of it, but is available to you at all times and in all places, and especially when you stop to break bread or take a drink of water. Come to the well, the spring of the water of eternal life, which is Jesus Christ. Come because you need God. Come because God needs you. Come because you know that in Jesus Christ, you will never thirst for saving love. Come, and be a part of the community of heaven, the fellowship of the baptized. Come, because the water from this drinking fountain will quench your thirst for free.

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St. Louis, Missouri
March 19, 2017
John 4:5-52