

LIVING WATER

John 4:1-26

Key Verses: 13-14, “Jesus answered, ‘Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’”

In chapter 3 we met Nicodemus, a Jewish leader who was a very religious, well-educated man of position and power in his community. Yet Jesus told him, “You must be born again.” Jesus taught him spiritual realities of the new birth. Today we begin the story of a very different person: a woman, who was not Jewish, not religious, probably not well-educated, and who was definitely not respected in her community. But Jesus saw through all these differences and offered her living water, welling up to eternal life. Maybe you see yourself as one who is like Nicodemus. Maybe you see yourself as one who is more like this Samaritan woman. Probably you have characteristics of both of them. May the Holy Spirit help us to accept Jesus’ invitation, exhortation and revelation.

First, Jesus’ invitation (1-14). This passage opens with the continuing issue of baptism and discipleship. Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John the Baptist—although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. So Jesus left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. It was not the time for Jesus to have a confrontation with the Pharisees.

Look at verses 4-6. “Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.”

In the time of Jesus, Samaria was in between Judea and Galilee. Judea was in the south, Samaria in the middle, and Galilee in the north. So the direct route from Judea to Galilee was through Samaria. But the Jews avoided Samaria due to a dark history. In about 1000 B.C. just after King Solomon’s reign, the nation split into a northern and southern kingdom due to war between Jewish tribes. A few hundred years later, in 722 B.C. Assyria conquered northern Israel. As a result, northern Israelites intermarried with Assyrians and became a mixed race, the Samaritans. The Jews despised the Samaritans. In addition, Samaritans had their own version of the Bible, their own constructed temple, and a rewritten history to favor themselves. So, there was animosity, prejudice, hatred and war going on for the last 1000 years between the Jews and the people of Samaria. In many ways, it is similar to divisions and hatred in the world today, between tribes, races, nations and different people groups. This was a huge barrier between the

Jews and Samaritans of Jesus' day. But for Jesus there was no barrier. Jesus did not live by prejudice. Jesus lived by love and truth.

Now look at verses 7-8. "When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Will you give me a drink?' (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)"

Not only did Jews and Samaritans not associate, but also men did not speak with women in public in that society. Jesus broke the ice, twice. Jesus broke the racial barrier and the gender barrier. Any ordinary Jewish man would not speak with or even look at this Samaritan woman, but simply let her get her water at the well and go on her way. Jesus was no ordinary Jewish man. Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" Why did Jesus ask this? The immediate reason was that Jesus was thirsty and tired. This shows his full humanity. Jesus needed food and drink since he had a physical body, like we all do. But there is another reason. This encounter was destined for this woman's benefit and for ours. It was for her sake and ours to come to know about living water.

Jesus initiated the conversation with this woman. It took social courage to do so. Jesus' reputation could be impacted in a negative way by this. This woman could insult him or misunderstand his intentions. Often times, we don't speak up when we can or even when we should. We don't want to be rejected or judged. We don't want to spend the time in our busy lives. Also, it can be impolite to talk to strangers. For many reasons, we often avoid talking to others. In this particular case, Jesus didn't follow tradition or what was politically correct. Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" It is usually not wrong for us to initiate conversation. Still, we make many excuses like, "That's weird," or, "I have no time," or, "What if they misinterpret my intentions?" It's exciting to initiate a conversation just because, of love. Even if we are hurt or misunderstood. Why? Because that is what God is doing all the time, just like Jesus. God is constantly reaching out in love to hurting and cold and lost people, just like Jesus.

Listen to the woman's response: "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" We don't have a recording of this woman's tone, but the words are not very friendly. At the very least, she was surprised. But she also knew very well the societal protocol which Jesus was breaking. She knew that Jesus was Jewish, probably by his clothing and his speaking accent. She also knew that she was a woman and Jesus was a man, and that it was awkward that he was speaking personally to her in public. What shocked her most was that Jesus was ignoring barriers and prejudices which were common at that time.

Now if I were Jesus, I would probably say at this point something like, "Why are so rude and selfish? Can't you see that I'm tired and thirsty? I am a human being you know?" Of course, Jesus didn't say that. What did he say?

Look at verse 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.’”

Jesus turned his initial request for water around and now offered her something even better. Jesus introduced “the gift of God” and “living water,” and in between these words he spoke of his hidden identity: “who it is that asks you for a drink.” Jesus mentioned “the gift of God.” I haven’t met anyone who doesn’t like to receive a free gift. For some people, gifts are their primary love language.¹ They love gifts. So what is the gift of God? We already learned from John 3:16 what the gift of God is: “For God so loved the world that he gave his One and Only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Jesus Christ is the gift of God, along with eternal life that comes through him.

Jesus asked her for a drink of well water. But then he spoke of “living” water which he had and could give to her, but she had to ask for it. What is “living water”? One thing is clear: it is not the water from her town well. We’ll get to “living water” in a moment.

So after mentioning the gift of God and living water, what did the woman say? She said, “Sir, you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?” (11-12)

She misunderstood Jesus’ words. She thought Jesus was speaking of ordinary water, from the well. Actually, that well water had been serving generations of people all the way back to Jacob, so for about 1800 years. That was an amazing well of water, which Jacob gave to that community of people. She was pretty sure that Jesus couldn’t do better than that. Maybe she was sarcastic. Maybe she was curious. She must’ve thought it was strange that a thirsty man who asked her for some water, was now offering her “living water.” Maybe she thought he was trying to swindle her in some way.

This is where Jesus explained more about this “living water.” Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (13-14).

Jesus began by stating an evident truth that we experience every day: “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again.” We all know that our thirst comes several times a day and needs to be filled by water or some other drink. That’s how ordinary water works: it satisfies our bodies for a time by replenishing our body cells, until we get dehydrated and thirsty again and need to get more water.

¹ In his book, “The Five Love Languages,” author Gary Chapman notes five primary love languages: gifts, words of affirmation, acts of service, quality time, and physical touch.

So water is a physical and temporary solution to our thirst. That's easy to understand. That's how all physical or worldly desires and solutions work.

What's mind-blowing is Jesus' offer in verse 14: "...but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The Jews knew that God is the true source of life. The prophet Jeremiah mentioned twice that God is the spring of living water. Jeremiah 17:13 says, "LORD, you are the hope of Israel; all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water." Even more significant to our passage is Jeremiah 2:13 where God rebukes his own people saying, "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."

This is where the problem is: all people love, trust or pursue, at one time or another, as their priority in life, something or someone other than God. The Bible calls this something or someone that takes the place of God an idol. The problem is: replacements for God do not and can not ever satisfy our souls. We'll come back to this in the next part.

The point here is that Jesus invites us to ask for the living water that he alone can give. The living water from Jesus satisfies our souls. John's gospel later explains that this is God himself, the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive (7:37b-39a). So how can we receive this living water, the Holy Spirit? The first condition is we must ask, receive, accept Jesus Christ.

The woman did this. She took a first step, as verse 15 shows: "The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.'" We could say that was the easy part. Now comes the hard part.

Second, Jesus' exhortation (16-19). Jesus took the conversation in a very different direction now, after she asked for the living water. Look at verse 16. "He told her, 'Go, call your husband and come back.'" Jesus is not requiring that she get her husband's permission. Jesus is now dealing with a very serious matter in her life. Jesus is touching a real sore spot in her heart. Jesus is the doctor of our souls. He knows our sickness and how to heal it. She didn't know this, yet.

Now see verses 17-18. "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five

husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

Oh my! Jesus knew her private history. We don't know why she had had five husbands. But, according to Jesus, number six was a live-in boyfriend. Jesus knew her entire life history. We can hide things from people. But no one can hide anything from God.

Proverbs 28:13 says, “Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” The way to forgiveness is to admit and confess our sins to God, ask his mercy, and turn from them. To say it another way: we must turn away from our God-replacements, that is, idols, and accept God as our living water, the true satisfaction of our souls.

David expressed this in Psalm 23:1, “The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.” David was satisfied in God alone. God was his Protector and Provider, his source of joy, peace, comfort, life and hope.

This Samaritan woman had looked for fulfillment in men. She must've thought that if only she found Mr.Right for her, she would be happy. But after five husbands, she gave up on marriage all together. She must've felt pretty bad about herself to prostitute herself for a man's love and provision.

Isn't it amazing that Jesus, the holy Son of God, didn't shame or humiliate her and push her away. This was the greatest barrier that Jesus broke down: the barrier between a sinful person and the sinless Son of God. Jesus was so graceful toward her. Technically, she did tell the truth: she had no husband at that moment. But she was really trying to hide her shameful history. Even so, Jesus did not call her out, calling her a liar. Rather, he wisely and gently agreed with her, “You are right...what you have just said is quite true.” She realized that Jesus was more than an ordinary stranger.

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet.” She knew that Jesus had close connections to God to know all about her. What is even more surprising is that Jesus did not condemn her. So she brought a troubling spiritual issue to Jesus' attention. Perhaps Jesus could shed some light on this controversy. This takes us to the next part.

Third, Jesus' revelation (20-26). Her troubling spiritual issue was this: “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” The Jews and Samaritans argued about who was worshiping God properly according to the place and manner.

Jesus taught her about true worship. The place is not so important, but the way to come to God is. Listen to Jesus' teaching in verses 21-24: “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not

know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

The Jews had the true revelation of God in the Bible. They upheld the true word of God handed down by the Hebrew prophets. The Samaritans disregarded parts of the Bible and made their own convenient worship. But the Jews maintained the true word of God, which included the promises and prophecies of the coming Messiah. Salvation would come from the Jews, for the Messiah would be a descendant of Abraham and David.

True worshipers worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth. They are the kind of worshipers that the Father God seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth. Sinners come to God in his way, not in any way that we choose. We come to God through the way that his word has revealed and by the enabling of the Holy Spirit. We come to God through Jesus the Messiah and Savior.

The woman still had some questions. She said to Jesus, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” Even though she was a sinful Samaritan woman, she too was longing for the coming of the Messiah.

Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” It was a jaw-dropping moment of revelation to her. This man, the one speaking to her, was the one her soul had longed to see and hear all her life. People had waited for centuries for the Messiah. And here he was standing right in front of her. What is most amazing is that he did not condemn her or chastise her. Rather, he invited her to receive the living water and to worship God in the Spirit and in truth. She only needed to turn from her sin and ask for the gift of God.

So in conclusion, let’s review briefly. Jesus invites us to ask and receive from him the living water. This requires confessing our sins to God and turning sincerely away from sin in repentance and toward God in faith and love. We come to worship God in the Spirit and in truth through the Messiah, Jesus Christ. May we all come to Jesus—honestly, humbly and sincerely, turning from all our sin and receiving the living water from him which wells up to eternal life. May God bless each of us to help guide even one person to the living water and gift of God in Jesus Christ.