

Quenching Our Thirst

A sermon on John 4:5-42; Exodus 17:1-7 & Romans 5:1-11 by Nathan Nettleton, 19 March 2017

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Message

Our deepest thirst will never be satisfied by cautious morality and religious compliance, but it will be abundantly quenched when we drink deeply of the living water of joyous intimacy that Jesus pours out freely.

Sermon

Last week, one of my friends, another Baptist pastor, sent me a request to sponsor him in a fundraiser for WaterAid called “Drink Just Water.” It’s a nice word play, with participants not drinking anything except water for a month to raise money to bring greater justice in the access to clean, safe drinking water for some of the world’s poorest communities.

Safe clean drinking water is something we take for granted most of the time here, but for much of the world’s population, it is much harder to come by. Just a few weeks ago, a major modern city, Santiago de Chile, was left without safe clean drinking water after unseasonal rains caused major floods which damaged infrastructure and contaminated the water supply. In many less developed parts of the world, having fresh water on tap would be seen as an almost unimaginable luxury.

The experience of its scarcity and our unavoidable need for it combine to make fresh running water a powerful symbol. The WaterAid campaign pictures of village children rejoicing at its arrival move even us who have little experience of its scarcity. We might not have known what it is like to go a long time without being able to quench our thirst, but even short term thirst is such a powerful and even painful need that we can imagine what it might be like and fear it.

Hunger and thirst are images we use for many things. Thirst tends to be the more urgent of the two, which is true to life, because a healthy human can survive for weeks without food, but barely a few days without water. So we speak of thirsting for things that are powerful needs which can easily drive us to the point of desperation. We thirst for love. We thirst for acceptance. We thirst for intimacy. We thirst for security and hope. We thirst for meaning and for peace. You know what it is that you thirst for.

The image of fresh water and its availability or scarcity features significantly and frequently in the Bible. The story we heard tonight of the Hebrew people’s desperate search for water in the wilderness at Rephidim and Meribah comes early in the Bible, and its picture of Moses striking the rock to cause a spring of living water to burst forth is alluded to again and again throughout the Bible as a sign of God’s generous provision. The very last chapter of the Bible (Revelation 22) centres around a vision of “the river of the water of life, flowing from the throne of God” as we hear the risen Jesus saying, “Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.”

As an image of all that God offers us and promises us, it probably surprises many people. We have often been sold an image of God as stern and rigid and controlling, but living water is flowing and messy and uncontrollable. It bubbles up wherever it likes and takes no notice of rules or boundaries. It spills over everything, and offers its life-giving gifts to all who come without any regard for reputation or behaviour or accomplishment. It satisfies the thirsts of

good and bad alike, generously and indiscriminately. If that is what God is offering, then life in God is very different from what we've often been told.

These things become very apparent in the story we heard from John's gospel tonight. A stark contrast between a religion of fear and control, and a relationship with a God of overflowing generosity is at the centre of the story of Jesus encountering the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well and their conversation about living water. The fact that their encounter happened at all was already an affront to the religion of rules.

There was not just one, but at least three reasons why the religious rules said that Jesus should give this woman a wide berth and not talk to her at all. She names them herself.

Firstly, Jews did not talk to Samaritans. The Samaritans were regarded as ethnically and religiously contaminated. They were a mixed race people who followed a corrupted form of the Jewish faith, and so any interaction with them was regarded as a serious danger to the purity and spiritual health of good religious Jews.

Secondly, respectable men, especially religious leaders, did not interact alone with unknown women. Religious law has always been extremely hung-up about sex, and has usually sought to severely limit opportunities for unregulated intimate contact. And in Jesus's day, saying that a rabbi went to the well and met a woman was a bit like saying that a rabbi went to a singles bar and met a woman. Remember all those stories of Hebrew heroes who met their future wives at the village well. Drawing water was women's work, and men usually only went to the village well in search of women. The gospel writer doesn't want us to miss this. Notice how he tells us that when the disciples found Jesus talking with a woman at the well, they were shocked.

Thirdly, and to make sure it is a lot worse, this is not just any woman. This is a woman with a very bad reputation in the town. That is already hinted at when we are told that she is coming out to draw water around noon. The only women who come out to draw water in the heat of the day are the ones who are not welcome to come when everyone else comes in the cool of the morning or evening. And the gospel writer makes sure we know that Jesus can't plead ignorance. He is able to tell that she has a history of relationship disasters and failed marriages and is now living "in sin" with her latest man.

No religious leader who takes seriously the religious rules and the need for keeping oneself pure and uncontaminated is going to willingly be anywhere near this woman. The very idea that the love and grace of God might well up and overflow generously for her would have been regarded as scandalous, blasphemous. Conventional religion would have no hesitation in sending her off into the dry deserts of condemnation and hopelessness. She could never hope to regain the kind of status and reputation that would see her welcomed into the life of faith. Conventional religion is like that: always drawing lines and erecting walls and driving people away to die of thirst with no hope of satisfaction. Even for those on the inside, it is hardly a great thirst quencher. It is too bound up with fear and the ever-present danger of slipping up and being sent off with those consigned to the parched wastelands.

In case you think I'm drawing a long bow here in suggesting that differing approaches to religion are a central issue in this story, look where their conversation goes after highlighting the woman's suspect past and introducing the concept of living water. The woman says, "Our

ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” We are straight into questions of religious correctness. Whose rules are right? Which version of religion is acceptable to God? And how does Jesus respond? His answer fits beautifully with his image of God as living water:

“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming, and is now here, when there won’t be any right and wrong place to worship, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. God is spirit, living water, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth, not in dry regulated religious correctness.”

There is a further social dimension to this encounter that we easily miss in our very different times. Perhaps not as different as we might wish. Even if this had been a respected woman in a suitable time and place, women in that day were not permitted to engage in theological discussion with rabbis. If they wanted to ask theological questions, the proper thing to do was ask their husbands at home. Open discussion about the nuances of theology and religion was something that women were excluded from. But here is Jesus, breaking all the rules, and treating this disreputable woman with respect and dignity as an equal, as a worthy participant in an open discussion about life and faith and God. Have you known yourself shut out, shunned and looked down on? That’s not what happens when you approach Jesus.

This woman is so thirsty. So thirsty. And Jesus doesn’t just talk about living water. His whole being, his whole presence, is like living water welling up and gushing forth for her parched and thirsty heart. For so long she has been deprived of dignity, of respect, of acceptance, of grace, of any intimacy that does anything more than use her body and cast her aside. So so thirsty. And though she warns Jesus that she is an “untouchable”, when he reveals that he already knows and it still inviting her to drink without demanding anything of her first, she throws herself headfirst into that water with all the joyous surprise and delight of those thirsty village children in the campaign pictures.

The intimacy he offers her shocks even his own disciples when they return to the scene. Jesus and the woman are both drinking deeply of the living water of mutual recognition, recognition that invites trust and intimacy, not fear of rejection. She is the first person in the gospel to whom he opens up and reveals his identity as the long awaited messiah. He recognises who she is and how wounded and rejected she is, but instead of shrinking fearfully from his recognition, new hope is born in her and lifts her sagging shoulders.

She experiences his recognition not as shame, but as forgiveness and acceptance and liberation. How do I know? Look what she does when she goes back into the town. She runs around to everyone, all these people who wouldn’t even go to the well with the likes of her, and she cries out, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” You don’t willingly introduce your hostile and disapproving neighbours to someone who has just demonstrated the ability to spill all your secrets unless you have been radically set free from the fear of being fully known.

It was just as the Apostle Paul said in the reading we heard tonight from his letter to the Romans: justified by faith, she has peace with God through Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.” She has drunk of the living water of true intimacy with the messiah, and she knows herself forgiven. She knows herself beloved.

She knows herself set free. She has obtained access to this grace and she's bathing in it with delight.

Those who remain committed to a religion of rules and formulas and clear boundaries find this story very disturbing. They desperately want Jesus to establish that she believes in him correctly, and to say something like "Go and sin no more." But Jesus is quite happy for her to bear witness to him while she is still asking "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" And he is quite happy to invite her into intimate relationship without even hinting at any sort of expectation about new behavioural standards and new aspirations of purity. As Paul put it, "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ poured out his life for us." Living water just wells up and spills out wherever it will, and all are welcome to drink deeply.

Jesus is quite dismissive of the religious concerns about who can associate with who and which group have the right mountain of regulations to worship God from. God is spirit and truth and living water, he says. Whoever will may come and drink freely and joyously wherever and whenever it bubbles up.

If you choose to keep living in a dry wasteland of rigid morality and regulated religion, Jesus will not love you any less. But he will grieve the lost opportunity to know and be known deeply by you. He will grieve the sight of you turning your back on the wellspring of living water and stumbling parched and thirsty through the desert. And he will continue to seek you out, even in the places of rejection in the heat of the baking sun. He will continue to come as a stranger, asking you for a drink, and offering you the bread of life and the living water of liberating intimacy.

In a few minutes time, we are going to once again rehearse our response to his invitation as we gather around this table. While normally we serve both strong wine and living water at this table, tonight in remembrance of the intimate act of communion between Jesus and the woman at Jacob's well, we are all going to receive the living water that Jesus offers. Perhaps that too would upset those who want to regulate worship and make sure everything is done by the rules. But Jesus tells us that God wants to be worshipped in spirit and in truth, and the rules will forever have to give way to the extravagantly generous fountain of living water that is Jesus himself. Let's drink deeply and live.