

A Drink of Water

Lent 3, Year A: Exodus 17:1-7, Romans 5:1-11, Psalm 95, John 4:5-42

“I want a drink of water!” calls the high-pitched little voice of a scared child about 2:00 in the morning. “Mommy, I want a drink of water.” It isn’t really water; it’s about connection. The child feels alone; water is the excuse to get his parents in his room. Connection and attachment, psychologists tell us, are our deepest human needs.

Jesus asks a Samaritan woman for a drink of water. He is asking not only for a drink to refresh his thirst after a long trip, He is seeking connection. In doing so, Jesus makes himself particularly vulnerable because he is inviting relationship with someone who would view him as an enemy.

The woman’s response shows this: “How is it that you a Jew should ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” The text comments: “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.” That’s not entirely accurate. Jews and Samaritans actually did share some things in common. For one, they shared a mutual hostility - a long history of fighting and retaliation. For another, they shared belief a common God with origins in the Patriarchs - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as Moses. They shared the Torah - the law of God. A The more literal ESV translates this phrase: For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.

Jews do not associate with Samaritans. We could say that about many groups in all spheres of life: family, social, religious, political. Hostility is alive and well today. Many of us express our longing for reconciliation - to re-establish secure bonds of family and love.

Richard Stearns, the president of World Vision, mentioned once speaking to a young Syrian girl in a refugee camp, and then meeting her later after she had been resettled. Even though life was better, she still longed for home.

You could say we are a world at war with God and one another - and we long for this world to become a true home.

Jesus in these four words, “Give me a drink” invites this woman home. He offers peace. Peace to a woman at war. To her suspicious question, he remarks: “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.”

If you knew who I am, you would come to me and I would give you living water.

Last week we read the account of Jesus and Nicodemus, the Jewish Pharisee. Jesus made a similar remark to him: you must be born from above by water and the Spirit. Here he makes that same offer of water to the woman at the well. Later in the gospel of John he will make this more explicit. He will say: “If anyone thirsts let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” The Gospel writer explains: “He said this about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him had yet to receive.”

Jesus continues: “Everyone who drinks of [the well] water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give will never be thirsty again. The water that I

will give will become in you a spring of water welling up to eternal life." Jesus offers her water on the inside - the indwelling of God, Himself, by His Spirit. This is the deepest, most secure bond of love.

There is the story of a husband and wife who fought all throughout their marriage. For their thirty-year anniversary their kids decided to give them a present: marriage counseling. They fought over whether they should accept it, but they finally did. They fought all the way to their appointment, and once in the office, they fought throughout the session. Finally the marriage counselor says "Stop! I've never done this before, but I'm going to do it now." He takes the wife in his arms and gives her a long embrace. Then he turns to the husband and says: "That is what your wife needs - three times a week." And the husband replies: "OK, you're right. I'll bring her here every Monday, Wednesday and Friday."

What we long for - what the Holy Spirit, what living water offers - is that deep secure embrace by God. Would you like a drink of living water?

Just as Nicodemus did not understand about being reborn of water and the Spirit, neither does the Samaritan woman. She interprets Jesus' words literally. She says: "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

Yet Jesus is so gracious. He pursues does not keep explaining; rather he probes for a deeper connection. "Go, call your husband and come here." In doing so he gives the woman an opportunity to name the tragedy of her life. "I have no husband." She is alone. She has no secure, committed attachment.

Jesus knows it. He knows this has been the story of her life: "'You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true."

We don't know actually what the story is about her husbands: Did they leave her? Did some of them die? Was she a victim of misfortune? Was she an adulteress? Is she living with this man out of desperation, because she needed someone to take her in? We don't know the answers to those questions. Yet we know this: her story is one about disunion, separation, divorce. No wonder she has such barriers up.

The Great Swiss theologian of the sixteenth century, John Calvin of Geneva (that's Switzerland, not Illinois), said there is no true knowledge of God without knowledge of self, and no knowledge of self without knowledge of God. It is a profound truth, and Jesus, coming as God and as man, brings to us both knowledge of ourselves and knowledge of God. In this encounter, the woman receives both. She is named; her tragic story is known. In Jesus, she encounters God; experiences grace. He offers to her truth, but without condemnation.

The woman begins to see Jesus a little more clearly: "Sir, I see you are a prophet. And then again she brings up controversy. The fight over the proper place to worship: on Mt. Gerazim, where the Samaritans worshiped or Jerusalem, where the Jews worshiped.

Jesus tells the woman it's actually not about either of those things. A time is coming when worship will be neither here nor there; we will worship in Spirit and truth. However,

he adds, the Jews actually do have something valid that you are missing. he says "we worship what we know and salvation is from the Jews."

What did the Jews have? The Jews, unlike the Samaritans, had a history of marriage with God - of a deep, secure bond of the covenant. They had known God through the intimate relationship of their history. They knew him through their religious rituals and their laws, through the blood of sacrifices, through the passionate songs of psalmists and the agonized pleas of the prophets. They knew relationship with God through their tragic experience of exile and, as the Scottish theologian Thomas Torrance writes: "through centuries and centuries of existence yoked to his word and covenant, until the truth was imprinted upon their conscience and there was burned into their souls . . . and so to the very brink of the gospel." The Jews knew that deep secure life-giving commitment - marriage to a God who has remained bound to them out of love. And here is Jesus, the embodiment of that covenant, the complete fulfillment of it - bringing it anew to Jews and to Samaritans.

The Samaritans and the Jews will now share something profound in common. Once enemies they have been brought near by the love of God in Jesus Christ. By coming near, as one of them, as fully human, he has approached all humanity with utmost vulnerability, naked, unashamed, openly, asking for a drink. In doing so, he bears their hostility, their resistance, to the very peak of hostility, as he carries it naked to the cross, and asks for a drink. "I thirst."

And there too, as he bears in his body the hostility and war between humanity and God. Our rebellion encounters God's love; God's anger against all the horror and injustice that rebellion has caused reconciled in the Body of Jesus. In Jesus' humanity, they meet and hold together. Jesus retains his unrelenting bond with us and with the Father - rendering our union, permanent, unbreakable, eternal.

The Samaritan woman receives a taste of this promise in the Jesus' words: "I who speak to you am he."

This woman of Samaria, and her friends and neighbors, come to Jesus. Here, the world begins to come together again. Jesus' disciples must have been amazed and flabbergasted.

Tonight we too participate in a world that is coming together again. In Christ's Body, Christ's blood, we eat and drink at the well, where we - once God's enemies - became friends. We rest in our most secure bond with him; a bond we can trust because of Jesus. Here also we discover that our

enemies become friends, the lonely become family, and strangers become lovers.

Yet when you leave tonight, we go into a world still at war. We wonder: how does Jesus make a difference?

Take this on faith: in your security, you can trust: Christ has already crossed over the barriers. He has already broken down the hostilities. So you can take that vulnerable step with others - approach your enemy, ask for a drink. Seek those far away - no matter how estranged, you can have confidence that Jesus has already joined you

together. And any step you take, in prayer and in trust, will cause walls to crumble, and living water to flow from your heart, bubbling up into eternal life.

So let us pray: Lord, can we have a drink of water?