



LIVING WATER

March 19, 2017, The Third Sunday in Lent

Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-15

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Theme: The “living water” offered by faith quenches a thirst the world cannot.

God of the living waters, we too thirst for water that quenches spirits gone dry. May your truth, flowing from these words of Scripture, gush into our lives and again satisfy our thirst for That-Which-Is-Beyond-Us. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

When we first moved to New York, my wife and I were jolted by how complicated getting a glass of water in a restaurant could be. Back in the Midwest, they automatically bring you a tall glass of ice water, usually with a lemon slice. Here you have to *ask* for water, and then they ask if you want bottled water or tap water, and then if you say “bottled” (which we hardly ever do because New York water is so good), they ask another question, “flat” or “bubbly.” And you’re not done yet. *Then*, then they ask something like, “Is Pellegrino OK?” *I mean, I just want a glass of water!*

In the second of the two water stories from the Bible that Stefan just read, the one from John’s Gospel, there are only two kinds of water. Jesus is passing through a corner of land named “Samaria.” The people who lived there, including the woman we meet in this story, were called “Samaritans.” They were the descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel who had, for generations, intermarried with a series of Gentile invaders. The shape of their religion had picked up pagan elements, and good Jews judged them irredeemable heretics. Jesus, as a good Jew, was not even supposed to talk with a Samaritan, especially not a lone Samaritan woman. And he certainly wasn’t supposed to drink water from her cup. Yet he



does. In fact, his conversation with her (we only heard part of it today) is the longest conversation recorded anywhere in the New Testament. At the end of it, the woman chooses to follow Jesus; indeed by the end of the tale her whole damnably unclean Samaritan village chooses to follow Jesus.

Like most everything in the Fourth Gospel, there are umpteen layers of meaning. Later in the story, we learn that a whiff of irregularity surrounds this woman (she's been married five times and is currently living with a non-husband), yet Jesus welcomes her. There's a sermon there.

Then there's the fact that a heretical Samaritan woman, indeed an entire heretical Samaritan village, was welcomed by Jesus. This would have raised more than a few eyebrows. There's a sermon there.

But today I want to talk about the water, actually the two kinds of water – the water from the well where Jesus stopped, and the water *Jesus* offers the woman, what he calls “*living water,*” *the “water that will become ... a spring of water gushing up into eternal life.”*

Like I said, in the Gospel of John everything seems to stand for something else; symbols lurk everywhere; metaphors prance through every story. And in this one, water – the two kinds of water – bear emblematic theological weight. The water the woman gives Jesus, the water from the well, the water drawn from the earth below, is what the world has to offer us. And what the world has to offer is not that bad, not bad at all – it's just not quite enough. If what the world has to offer us *were* enough, you and I would not be sitting here in the church on a March morning asking after the *other* kind of water, the water Jesus has to offer, what He names “living water.”

A scholar-minister named Will Willimon used to teach at Duke University. He said this about the water the world has to offer, the kind of water prestigious universities, for instance, have on offer. Willimon put it bluntly: “*I work at a university where we are in the business of helping people grow up and be great – self-made, self-sufficient, empowered, liberated, free, competent... When you get*



out of here, if you do what we faculty tell you, you will be smart, professional, on your own – like us – and you won't need Jesus or anybody else." It's not just universities. The entire weight of modern American culture encourages an unreal human autonomy that admits no need of any reality beyond *me*.

There's nothing necessarily wrong with self-sufficiency, nothing wrong with independence, nothing wrong with intellectual achievement, nothing wrong with professional success, nothing intrinsically wrong with the material comforts we enjoy, nothing wrong with the "water of the world," as it were.

But... as my wife is wont to say, "There's a big 'but' on the end of that sentence." So..., *but*, but we long for more, we long for something higher and deeper; we long for that which can give life some real meaning; we ache for the Transcendent – that which is bigger and older and higher than just me and my little cluster of fears, desires and ambitions. In the vocabulary of today's Bible reading, we thirst for living water. As Augustine memorably phrased it on the opening page of his *Confessions*, "*Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.*" This he said after an early life stuffed with wild and libidinous partying and a mid-life of remarkable professional achievement and material success.

Fifteen-hundred years later, a successful French existentialist novelist named Albert Camus, started attending church, a very curious thing for a French existentialist to do. Camus wrote this:

"The reason I have been coming to church is because I am seeking. I am almost on a pilgrimage – seeking something to fill the void that I am experiencing – no one knows. Certainly not the public, and readers of my novels, while they may see the void, are not finding the answers in what they are reading. But down deep you are right – I am searching for something that the world is not giving me."

Louisa Hulett is a political science professor who was raised in the church, left, and ultimately came back. Her story is like many of ours. Hulett wrote this about returning faith:



“I was a prodigal child who wandered to a distant land far from God. I had no time for God. I was busy with my life and preoccupied with career advancement. Hanging on to a passing acquaintance with a blurry, generic God, I attended church until college. But my weak and passive faith was no match for the skepticism, intellectual arrogance and blissfully self-gratifying life style I learned and embraced in collage. After collage, I studied hard, earned my PhD (my first idol) and started teaching international relations... I wrote several articles and books (publications, my second idol) and was well received in the classroom.... I earned tenure (my third idol) and received the acclaim of being a big fish in a small pond. I controlled my fate, or so I thought.

My other passion was sports... I loved to win... As a successful person, I could live the way I wanted to... Despite this great life, however, I began to feel that something was missing. Career and sports were not enough. I still hated to lose, but winning and succeeding offered no joy... I was questioning the value of life. What was my purpose in life? Why was there a universe?... I began to do some serious soul-searching. I realized that I was very far from God and was missing out on something.”

There comes a day in many lives – usually lives lived reflectively and with self-awareness – when neither merest pleasures nor professional success, neither personal goals achieved nor all the nice things quite fill the void. Not the country house or the bigger apartment or the remodeled apartment or the partnership or the dream job or big bonus – none of it *quite* quenches the thirst. There is, it would seem, something like a God-shaped hole in most every human heart.

Again as I said, in John everything is more than it appears. The well-water the woman offers is not just water, and the living water Jesus offers her is not just water. The living water points toward baptism. Baptism, then and now, whether infant or adult, is the ancient sign of commitment to be a follower of Jesus Christ. The “living water” means everything baptism means; it means everything following Jesus means.



Like baptism, that living water is free, free for asking. But be warned, free as it is, it costs you everything – the utter reorientation of life’s values and priorities, a total refocusing of life. But here’s the ironic good news of the gospel, in giving it away, you get it all back. You get your life back..., but not the same. It comes back raised up, transformed.

How ironic (but how true) it is that perfect freedom is to be found in service to God and others.

How ironic (but how true) it is that we find the love we ache for only in extravagantly loving others.

How ironic (but how true) it is that in turning away from self we find ourselves.

How ironic (but how true) it is that in giving we receive.

How ironic (but how true) it is that in sacrifice we find the highest of joys.

The living water He offers us is free..., but it costs everything. But remember, the life we yield to God we get back – transformed, shaped into blessing. It comes back as full life, “eternal life” in Jesus’ words – life deeper and higher than we even know how to expect.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.