

Thirsty!

March 15, 2020

UMCG

Last week Nicodemus walked into our lives in the cool, dark of night...full of shadows and questions....doubt and resistance. This week, a woman from Samaria walks into Jesus' life—and ours. And she walks in, not in the darkness of night, but in the bright noonday sun. (1) And in the bright light of day we are told the truth about who she is and who we are and where we've been in our lives. Not just the beautiful moments of our lives but the difficult moment, those times of wandering, regret, failure and loss. In short, the broken places in our lives.

Today we come face to faith with **thirst**. Thirsty people around a well in the burning noonday heat in the wilderness in Samaria. Two thirsty people encounter each other at a well. Jesus, physically thirsty from his travels through the Samaritan countryside encounters this unknown, unnamed Samaritan woman. She was no doubt physically thirsty, but spiritually thirsty as well.

Last week, we listened in as Jesus talked to Nicodemus, the religious leader in Jerusalem. Nicodemus who had to sneak in to visit Jesus in the middle of the night. Nicodemus, for all his religious learning, just couldn't understand what Jesus meant by being "born again" as a metaphor for spiritual transformation. Nicodemus the literalist just couldn't get it. (2)

Today we listen in...we sit with Jesus who is thirsty and running on empty as he interacts with a Samaritan woman who herself is thirsty and running on empty. And as we listen in, perhaps we can get in touch with our own thirst. For we are all thirsting for something in life. For deep meaning. For purpose.

It's so fitting that today's scene unfolds by a deep well that provides the one thing most needed for physical survival...water! We can last longer without food than water. And the disciples have all gone into town for food. And Jesus sits there, tired from his travels, with no bucket and no rope. He needs some help to quench his thirst. And a woman walks up to the well. Alone.

The other women from town would have no doubt come to the well in the cool, early morning hours. This woman apparently had no friends to help her out, to ease her work.

When Jesus asks her for a drink of water she asks in return: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?” Jews would not defile themselves by sharing a cup, much less a conversation, with a Samaritan, and a Samaritan woman to boot! Not only is this woman an outsider as a Samaritan, she is also an outsider due to a questionable past. Her husbands have divorced her or died. She has probably had to marry her husband’s brother or brothers (known as levirate marriage) or at least get remarried to someone else in order not to suffer the fate of an unattached female in that society. If you did not have a husband, a father, or a son to care for you, you ended up a beggar or a prostitute or both. (There’s good reason why the Bible reminds us to look after widows and orphans. Life has always been hard on them.)

So Jesus asks this woman for a cup of water. Instead of using fangled, sophisticated theological terms, he uses words we can all understand and relate to. Basic, everyday things like water and bread, salt and light, birds and flowers. And he can identify with us. He’s gone into the desert and knows what it feels like to struggle and thirst and hunger and fight despair. He knows frustration and pain, abandonment and betrayal. So now...when thirsty, he asks this woman for a drink of water and she’s amazed. Then he starts talking about ‘living’ water which is even more amazing. Who can blame her for thinking in concrete terms when he offers her that possibility?

And so we listen in on this conversation about “water” that will satisfy the deepest longings of her soul. And she no doubt thinks about how heavy her clay jar is each day as she lugs her water home. But soon...much sooner than Nicodemus...she realizes that this person, this stranger, is offering her something even more necessary for her life than physical water. He is offering her the living water of God’s grace and acceptance...acceptance **JUST AS SHE IS!**

Unlike “wise” Nicodemus, the religious scholar, who keeps asking, “How can this be?” ...she, understanding her own need, openly demands: “Sir, give me this water!” Then Jesus shows her just how powerful he is. He does so by telling her he knows her...really knows her....all about her! As soon as she grasps that Jesus is a prophet because he knows all that she’s ever done...well, she tries to change the subject. (So would I!) She engages him in a dialogue. An interfaith dialogue actually. She starts talking theology with Jesus. She gets down to brass tacks about the most pressing question that divided Samaritans from Jews...the hot button religious issue that divided and alienated them and made them fear and dislike each other.

Do you know what that issue was? Where is the proper place to worship God??? (Talk about worship wars!)

I like the way The Message version of the Bible puts this part of today’s passage. “The time is coming,” Jesus says, “it has already come, in fact—when what you’re called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter. It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people God is out looking for: Those who are simply and honestly themselves before God in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship God must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.”

Today, many of us know deep gratitude and joy for the way God has accepted us and loved us and showered us with grace...no matter who we are or where we are on life’s journey. And knowing God’s grace and acceptance, don’t we too want to go out to the ‘marketplace’ ...the public arena...and share the Good News like this Samaritan woman? COME AND SEE! See what Jesus has done in my life! Like the woman at the well we may feel we’re the least likely to spread the good news. We are not perfect! Far from it! Each of us is the wrong “something or other.”

Running on empty...whether we are at the well, thirsty and tired, doing our daily tasks...or in the market place...or the mall...or talking politics or religion or worried about COVID 19...we are all thirsty...thirsty for something more than water. We thirst for the living water of Gods' love and grace, acceptance and forgiveness. We thirst for God's words of healing, acceptance and unconditional love, whether we understand all the answers or not. We search for meaning and purpose in life. We want our lives to matter...to count!

All of us...each one of us have known, at one time or another, what it means to be "the other" ...to be on the "outside" with someone or some group. We know what it means to be alone...isolated and afraid, discouraged and rejected. We know that we have all fallen short of what God expects of us, much less of what we expect of ourselves!

But...in time we turn to God. We lift up our faces. And we feel the living water wash over us. And we drink in the cool clear water of God's grace and acceptance. And we know that the very God who knows each of us to the core...who knows the truth about us...this God accepts you and me...loves you and me...and calls us, just like the Samaritan woman, to transformed lives that in turn share the Good News of God's unconditional acceptance wherever we go.

From the dark of night to the brightness of high noon. From the "righteous" religious leader, Nicodemus, to the nameless "sinner," the Samaritan woman, Jesus welcomes us—all of us—just as we are. Reaches out to us. Patiently works with us...dialogues with us...accepts us...and if we let him, quenches our thirst and transforms our lives.

Amen.

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- (1) One of the characteristics of John's Gospel is his play on light and darkness, literally and metaphorically, throughout his work.
- (2) Another characteristic of John's Gospel is his use of the multi-valence of words. He often uses words that can be taken both literally and metaphorically at the same time.