

“When You Have No Bucket and the Well is Deep”

Exodus 17:1-7

John 4:5-42

Jesus wasn't warmly embraced by the religious people of his day. No wonder! He didn't do what we religious people like to do. He ignored the social mores of his day. Though he would never turn his back on sin, he was no crusader against immorality. Neither did he get bogged down in a lot of theology.

What were the social mores of his day? One was that Jews did not share things in common with Samaritans. Every water fountain was clearly labeled either SAMS ONLY or JEWS ONLY. Another was that men don't talk to women in public places.

Race and gender, however, are not important when you're really thirsty. Nor was her questionable morality. Not only does he ask a Samaritan woman for a drink of water, he asks the first century equivalent to Elizabeth Taylor for a drink of water! He confronts the woman with the truth – she has been divorced five times and currently is living with a man without benefit of clergy – yet he doesn't place words of condemnation on to her back, already weary from carrying the heavy jars of water in the heat of the day.

Notice that when Jesus touches that raw nerve in her life, she changes the subject and tries to debate the theologically correct place to worship God. That's just like us, too. When the conversation turns up close and personal, we get nervous and talk religion, especially the kind that bears little relevance for life.

Anthony DeMello writes,

When the guru sat down to worship each evening the ashram cat would get in the way and distract the worshipers. So he ordered that the cat be tied during evening worship.

After the guru died the cat continued to be tied during evening worship. And when the cat expired, another cat was brought to the ashram so that it could be duly tied during evening worship.

Centuries later, learned treatises were written by the guru's scholarly disciples on the liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is performed.¹

Jesus doesn't let himself get preoccupied by such not-so-hot topics as the proper place to worship God. Nor does he allow our past to shape our future. Nor does he play by society's rules about those with whom you should or should not associate. Why is he so cavalier about issues that we regularly go to the mat over? He had something more important on his mind – the offer of living water.

This living water is not the quick fix the woman first thought it to be. She misunderstood what Jesus meant and thought he was offering some magical potion to relieve her from her daily trek to the well. Remember, Jesus resisted the temptation to turn stones into bread. He does not give quick solutions to all the world's ills, promising that everyone who believed would live happily ever after.

This woman was hopping from husband to husband, maybe even from job to job, from church to church, from trinket to trinket. She was looking for love in all the wrong places. She didn't know how to satisfy her thirst. Jesus offered living water which would satisfy her thirst forever. To taste it is to discover an unconditional love and acceptance that transforms all of life.

The reading from Exodus complements very well this story. It tells of the time when the children of Israel were wandering through the desert for 40 years making their way to the Promised Land. The joy of their new found freedom from slavery soon evaporated when they discovered that some aspects of life in Egypt were a lot better, such as plenty to eat and drink. In the heat of the day they complained to Moses, **“Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us ... with thirst? ... Is the Lord among us or not?”**

Is that not our story? Maybe we're in a desert without even knowing it, wondering if the Lord is among us or not. Several years ago, we were blessed with a trip to Alaska. Tired of the relentless heat and humidity of Florida, my wife had this desire to go as far north in this country as we could, so we did. I'll be eternally grateful for the providence of God for working out this compromise called Ambler, PA, otherwise I might have been preaching for the past ten years in a place called Deadhorse, Alaska! One thing we learned on that trip was that the area above the Arctic Circle is classified as a desert because it receives a minimal amount of precipitation. It didn't look like a desert, and it certainly didn't feel like one, but the Arctic region is officially a desert.

We're going through one of those times when many folk feel that the church is a desert full of thirsty people. It doesn't look like a desert and it shouldn't be a desert, but many people are thirsty for something more than what they have found thus far in being the church. If that is true for you, consider yourself in good company. So often the Psalmists sings, as we did earlier, about thirsting for God, **“as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”**ⁱ

Some time ago I was talking to a woman who worships with us regularly but is not sure she is ready to join this congregation. A member of another congregation, she said that over the years she had done a lot of church work and wanted no more part of serving on committees. “All I want to do is to come to worship and be spiritually fed,” she said. There was a genuine weariness in her voice. That's what happens when we concentrate on church work instead of the work of the church. The work of the church is dispensing living water, that is, helping one another to grow in our relationship with God.

There's a thirst that is satisfied by being committed to Jesus, but it is not satisfied by being “committed” to him. Sometimes during Session meetings we lament how difficult it is to find people to serve on committees, yet in addition to those who are regularly involved in Bible study groups and women's circles, we currently have 55 people participating in small groups during Lent

and we routinely have 100 people or so every January who help with our ministry of hospitality to homeless families. What does that tell you? People prefer to do the work of the church rather than church work!

I'm not here to bash committees. The church can't work without them. Even committees can be spiritually nurturing, especially when they become communities and the members care for one another as much, if not even more, than they care for the business at hand. But it's so easy to get distracted by things that ultimately don't matter. Planning menus for a church supper or debating whether to tile or paint the walls when the church's bathrooms are renovated are not deep spiritual experiences. Indeed, such activities can become very dispiriting.

Even we pastors can become disoriented. Someone has said, "Being a pastor is like being a stray dog at a whistler's convention." In fact, just last week a newspaper article reported how colleges and seminaries are now offering programs in church finance as a way to guard against embezzlement. One priest who is the new pastor of a church that experienced a financial scandal says that "pastors should receive some administrative training, either at seminaries or from the dioceses after being ordained."ⁱⁱⁱ OK, I guess we need to add that to the list of things to do!

Howard Rice is a retired professor of spirituality at San Francisco Seminary and a former Moderator of the General Assembly of our denomination. In a book entitled, The Pastor as Spiritual Guide he writes:

The problems clergy face reveal the church's struggle with its own self-understanding. The church's lack of clarity about its mission results in lack of clarity related to the role of its clergy. Lack of clarity about expectations means that no matter what they do, pastors come under attack for not doing something quite different. More than any other issue, pastors complain that they spend their days doing what they never believed they would have to do so much. Many feel trapped in administrative work that is contrary to their sense of calling. The work to which they feel most called is often the activity least valued by parishioners. Pastors' concern with the sacred devolves into mundane business matters. Called and prepared to be soul makers and soul healers, pastors become CEOs. Church bureaucracy expects them to show a gain at the end of the year (of members and budget numbers) when they thought themselves called to be spokespersons for God. They spend days and nights in meetings wrangling over secular matters, when they believe themselves to have been sent to speak a word from the Lord to a particular people.^{iv}

Having said all that, I firmly believe that the Christian community provides the best opportunity for us to meet the One who promises that **"those who hunger and thirst for righteousness shall be satisfied."**^v Here we bring that hunger and thirst and here we meet the Lord of life who hungers and thirsts for us.

Let's not overlook the fact that in this encounter with the Samaritan woman it is Jesus who firsts asks for a drink. Yes, it was a physical need that he had. He was exhausted and thirsty from his

travels. But he sought to have that need satisfied in a most spiritual way. He didn't claim godly powers and wave a magic wand to instantly produce a cup of cool water. Instead, he did what no self-respecting Jew would have done; he simply asked this woman to give him a drink. She had something he didn't have and needed – a bucket. He had something she didn't have and needed – the assurance that she was valued and beloved by God.

His very request, therefore, must have seemed to her as living water. I can imagine her thinking to herself, “WOW! He's asking me, a woman, a Samaritan, a sinner to serve him. Me! He's asking me!?” And if he asks her, is it too hard to think that he asks us?

It may be difficult for us to consider that Jesus would have any needs that we could answer, but do we not often say that “we are the hands of Christ as we serve those in need;” or “we are the feet of Christ as we take the gospel to the ends of the earth;” and together “we are the body of Christ in the world”?

Before we are his hands, his feet, his body, Jesus graces us with living water which is signified in our baptism. **“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine.”**^{vi} Then he sends us forth to do the work of his church. For almost 100 years, we Presbyterians have understood that work to be:

the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
the maintenance of divine worship;
the preservation of the truth;
the promotion of social righteousness;
the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.^{vii}

Engaging in such work is like drinking living water. It satisfies and never leaves an after-thirst.

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- i. The Song of the Bird, (Garden City, NY: Image Books, Doubleday, 1984), p. 63
 - ii. Psalm 63:1; see also Psalms 42, 69 and 143
 - iii. *Protecting Church Assets*, by Kathy Matheson of the Associated Press, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 18, 2008
 - iv. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), p. 15
 - v. Matthew 5:6
 - vi. Isaiah 43:1
 - vii. Book of Order, G-1.0200