

## *Thirst*

Whitefish UMC

March 27, 2011

John 4:5-42

- ✦ The headlines scream the danger to children and pregnant women of drinking water from the tap. People in cities miles away from the nuclear power plant make a run on bottled water, clearing store shelves in a matter of hours. Suddenly the water so taken for granted is precious in remembering its past abundance and purity.
- ✦ Water: absolutely necessary for life. For most of us, slaking our thirst is as simple as turning a faucet knob or pressing a glass to a dispenser in the refrigerator door. Water is cheap, readily available, reasonably clean, and something we take for granted. Take these facts, for example, from <http://www.allaboutwater.org/water-facts.html>:
  - Between 70-75% of the earth's surface is covered with water.
  - 70% of an adult human's body is made up of water.
  - About 80% of an infant's body weight at birth is water.
  - Since the earth is a closed system, the same water that existed millions of years ago on earth is still present today.
  - The average person in the United States uses 80-100 gallons of water each day. An American taking a five minute shower uses more water than a typical person living in a developing nation slum uses in an entire day.
  - Of all the water on earth only about three tenths of one percent is able to be used by humans.

If you found these facts intriguing, ponder these facts from [water.org](http://water.org):

- Nearly one billion people lack access to safe water, and 2.5 billion lack improved sanitation. More of the world's population have cell phones than toilets.
  - The ancient Romans had access to better quality water than half the world's population today.
  - Half of the world's hospitalizations are due to water-related disease.
  - 1.4 million children die due to water-related illness each year. That means every 20 seconds a child dies from something that should be preventable.
- ✧ Does God care about water? Does God care about us? Yes. Consider then this story about both physical and spiritual thirst and how living water slakes both.
- ✧ From a dark and windy night to the heat of the noonday sun; from an encounter with a man of great social standing, to a conversation with a woman with less than none. But just as Jesus has told the Pharisee Nicodemus, in last week's scripture text, the Spirit blows where it will. And now the Spirit has brought Jesus and a most unlikely woman together in enemy territory at a deserted well.
- ✧ Here the unnamed, unmanned woman at the well, along with Jesus, will be born again in the Spirit with the water of life and of truth. It is an unexpected and improbable encounter, to be sure.
- ✧ Tired from his journey, Jesus sits down at Jacob's well, then realizes that he has no cup or bucket with which to draw the water: the disciples have gone off to buy food and he is alone. But someone else is out in the desert heat, and she is carrying a bucket. She may be the

- last person on earth Jesus wants to encounter, because not only is she a woman, she is a divorced woman, a woman with a questionable reputation. A Samaritan. By custom, Rabbi Jesus ought not even speak with her in public, let alone drink from her Samaritan bucket.
- ✦ It is about noon. There are no literal shadows, there is no protective cover, no nighttime leisure for theological exchange and reflection. There is only this woman, and she is insolent, defensive, strong, and determined. What transpires between the two is nothing short of miraculous. These strangers, these enemies—whose worlds would ordinarily never connect—discover at the well that they need each other.
  - ✦ How could this have been a chance encounter? Apparently, Jesus had told the disciples to journey directly into enemy territory, where most Jews would have taken an extra nine hours to go around Samaria, which was unclean and to be avoided whenever possible.
  - ✦ But for the sake of healing, Jesus follows the lead of the Holy Spirit and makes himself vulnerable. He is tired and alone in the heat of the day with no water. It is not a metaphorical desert. Left alone in the hot sun, he could die without water.
  - ✦ We don't know why the disciples left Jesus alone. But the woman, whose name is never revealed, is out in the heat of the noonday because she has been ostracized and shunned, and is on her way to provide for her most basic needs. No father, husband, brother, or son is around to look after her. And there is no group of women to share her story, wipe her tears, or help her laugh.

- ✦ It's traditional, in many churches, to see this bible story as a one-way ticket for salvation for a sinful and fallen woman. But I want to offer another view.
- ✦ Jesus needs to drink fresh water to live. The woman also needs a drink: she needs the fresh, living water of grace and truth only Jesus can provide to drink deeply of healing and wholeness and a new life. And in their own needs, these two remind us of their mutual humanity. They share in the holy Source of Life that transcends all boundary, custom, fear, hatred, and scarcity.
- ✦ And somehow, with all distractions forgotten, they discover in a lively conversation that they need each other, that distaste dissolves into relationship. They glimpse a spiritual wholeness, a new healing reality.
- ✦ Jesus models a barrier-breaking relationship of mutuality and compassion. The woman is bold enough to both remind Jesus of what separates them—he is a Jew and she a Samaritan—and of what connects them—their ancestor Jacob. She is bodacious and audacious and spars verbally with this strange man. In their truth-telling she experiences him as prophet and in turn she is acclaimed for speaking the Gospel.
- ✦ This is one of my favorite bible stories. (It drives Tom crazy when I say this, because he says I say it about so many texts.) But it really is meaningful for me. It has so many levels, so many fascinating twists and turns, and so much relevance for my own experience.
- ✦ And when I think about this bible story, I am reminded of one of my favorite films, which is also a play. It's called *Shadowlands*. *Shadowlands* brings to life the remarkable but essentially true story of

C.S. Lewis, (Anthony Hopkins) the beloved British author of children's books and Christian theology, and Joy Davidman Gresham, (Deborah Winger) an American poet, former communist, and divorced mother of a nine-year old son, Douglas. The story begins in 1952, with C.S. Lewis (Jack) comfortably settled in a safe and ordered bachelor life with his brother Warnie in the rarefied air of post-war Oxford. Jack, whose audience ranges widely and who receives correspondence from all over the world, is intrigued by letters he receives from Joy Davidman, "who seems to know him even though she's never met him." (Sound familiar?) Although his brother warns him against the possible disruption of their peaceful lives by this brash American woman when she writes asking to meet Jack in a hotel for tea when she comes to England, Jack agrees to meet her. And of course Joy and her son do, gradually but inextricably, alter the course of each other's life-journeys, expanding and enlivening them beyond anyone's imagination.

✦ Through her intellect, wit, brazenness, faith, and willingness to challenge Lewis (who is known for never losing an argument), Joy befriends Jack, who agrees to marry her (in name only) to prevent her deportation when she returns to England to resettle and escape the pain of her divorce from an abusive and alcoholic writer-husband in America. You can imagine the rest—it is the stuff of Hollywood, but it is a true story. Distance, then her illness, the threat of her being taken away leads to a realization of what they have become for one another. In the few years left to them, they marry, treasure the miraculous gift of 3 years together, and reach the deepest levels of human love in their joy and in their grief and in their healing.

- ✦ This film, and today's story of the woman at the well, convey that message that by risking everything and entering into deep, loving, relationships, relationships in which we are fully known, we draw not only closer to each other but closer to God as well. Not just in romantic love, as it turned into for C.S. Lewis and Joy Davidman, but in unromantic relationships that explore the other in meaningful ways.
- ✦ Jesus and the Samaritan woman could have avoided each other, not spoken, and missed an incredible opportunity for transformation, for healing, for wholeness. Just as C.S. Lewis and Joy Gresham could have stayed in the security and stability of their expectations. The same is true for us.
- ✦ We go about our lives so concerned with living well, with the details of our lives, that we forget the living well of healing and wholeness offered by risking being "surprised by Joy." And what is the source of that Joy? It is the living water of Jesus, who saves us from our worst predictable selves and offers us wholeness and life everlasting in him.
- ✦ It's also an appreciation for the blessing and importance of clean water, which is something we aim to lift up through our community garden. And isn't it a place where diverse people we might not usually encounter come to water their gardens and their hopes for the future wholeness of creation and their place in it?
- ✦ What if our church became a place, like the village square of old where Jesus and the Samaritan woman met, for life-saving conversation and living water? What if we allowed ourselves to be surprised by getting to know someone we might not otherwise find

time for. My own experience confirms that I learn important lessons from people from whom I least expect it.

- ✦ Walk to Emmaus encounter with someone I would have rather avoided.
- ✦ The gospel witnesses to the gift of God for all God's children. In the vulnerability of an interdependent community, in the insistence upon relationship, in the breaking down of barriers. Jesus shows us a new way to learn about one another, learn the truth of one another, and learn that we need each other.
- ✦ On another day, at about noon, Jesus will face death and again confess his thirst. On that day, only vinegar will be offered—in mockery. The gift of his living water will not be apparent to the one holding that sour sponge. But today, when Jesus and the Samaritan woman meet, they conspire to bring life out of death. The water they offer each other, water that quenches the thirst of body and soul, holds the gift of life for all.
- ✦ Mary Oliver speaks eloquently of the yearning we each have for life-giving water in her poem, aptly called “Thirst.”

✦ Another morning and I wake with thirst  
for the goodness I do not have. I walk  
out to the pond and all the way God has  
given us such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord,  
I was never a quick scholar but sulked  
and hunched over my books past the  
hour and the bell; grant me, in your

mercy, a little more time. Love for the earth and love for you are having such a long conversation in my heart. Who knows what will finally happen or where I will be sent, yet already I have given a great many things away, expecting to be told to pack nothing, except the prayers which, with this thirst, I am slowly learning.

- ⌘ Shadows do enter the life of the Samaritan woman. And on that Friday that we call good, shadows will darken the sun as Jesus dies on the cross. Our lives are full of bright light and shadows. But if we drink from the living well that is Jesus, and through deep relationship in bold new ways with the living Christ in each other, we taste and see the goodness of the Lord.
- ⌘ Play Taste and See from CD??

Sources:

Mary Oliver, "Thirst," 2006.