

“A well that never runs dry. . .”

John 4:5-15

Anne M. Cameron

Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church

3rd Sunday of Lent

February 24, 2008

Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?"

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink? Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?" Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water. . .”

In her book, Words Around the Font, Gail Ramshaw recalls when she was in high school visiting Yale University. At the time, the Yale Art Gallery had a reproduction of a famous third century baptistery that had been discovered in Syria¹. In a strange but theologically accurate design, the architecture of the font resembles a tomb---thus reminding us of our death in Christ through the waters of baptism. Vivid frescoes cover the walls around this font, which is set into a room (that is the baptistery). The image of Jesus greeting the woman at the well figures prominently in one painting.

In the biblical story of the woman at the well, we encounter a woman who took on the daily task still shared by many poor women.

¹ Dura-Europas, Syria. This baptistery was inside an early Christian house-church. In an interesting footnote here, Ramshaw also reports that as a female she was not allowed to enter the Yale Library, as these were the days before Yale became a co-ed institution.

This woman is not ever named in scripture. She is referred to only as “a Samaritan” woman.

Ramshaw draws on the ancient image of the woman at the well and carries it into the 21st century. She says: “Twice a day women walk the distance to the local well and carry back on their head or shoulders the pots of water needed for living. This back-breaking task has long been assigned to women. Whether it is cooking, washing dishes or clothes, bathing, cleaning, or watering the animals, it is women in many societies who ache for a course of endlessly flowing water. . .”²

If you have ever been backpacking in the wilderness, or if you have ever been camping in an area that has no public water, you have had to cart water from a natural source, and you have had a small taste of this kind of labor. Of course, you also know you will soon return to your hot and cold running water and your automatic clothes washer.

Today, in non-industrialized regions, poverty, drought, and war prevent access to safe water. 2.6 billion people, mostly women and children---spend literally hours each day hauling water. The water is often polluted. Some families spend half their income paying for access to water supplies close to home³.

Safe drinking water is a daily health threat for millions of children, who die from the scourge of chronic diarrhea. Every fifteen seconds a child dies from a water-related disease (WaterAid, England). This massive health problem is not only a social problem, it is a moral and political disaster. And, it is basically, a matter of justice⁴.

Water has always been a precious commodity. This was especially true in the area where Jesus lived. The geography and climate of Galilee is similar to that of Georgia, with an average rainfall of 40 inches, hot, dry summers, and rocky terrain that does not hold much water even when it does rain. And though the prospects for rain are much better in Galilee than they are in other parts of Israel, fresh, flowing water has always been critical for life.

So it should be no surprise to us that the idea of living water would attract this woman who talks with Jesus. The importance of living water

² Gail Ramshaw, *Words Around the Font*, p. 55-56.

³ <http://www.christianchildrensfund.org>

⁴ Adequate water was an issue in Biblical times, and it is an issue today. Even in our industrialized society, water shortages are becoming more and more common. Water has been described as the “oil” of the future. The pundits predict that in the 22nd century, wars will be fought over water, as they are now fought over oil.

is no surprise, but the fact that Jesus choose to talk about it with this particular person is. This is a remarkable conversation. It is the longest recorded conversation between Jesus and another person in the entire New Testament.

You might think Jesus would spend his longest recorded conversation with a learned Hebrew scholar, or with a member of the Sanhedrin, but this is not the case. He spends his time with a woman, of all people. A woman who is triply outcast. First of all, she is a woman! Unrelated men and women did not engage in long conversations, or even small talk. We know she must be some sort of outcast in her village, or she wouldn't be drawing water in the heat of the day. No one would choose to do such back breaking work at high noon unless they had no other alternative.

Second, she is a Samaritan. Jews wouldn't be caught dead talking to Samaritans. It was completely taboo for them to share a water dipper. Samaritans were considered ritually unclean. Everything they touched was also unclean.

And, finally, we discover she is a woman of suspect sexual morals. (This is the part of the story as it continues beyond our reading today). In requesting a drink of water from her, Jesus violates just about every social boundary he can violate! Gender, religion, and social mores are tossed to the wind in this important discourse about living water.

The unnamed Samaritan woman is eager to hear about where to get this living water. This would have been water coming from an underground source or stream, a valuable find, then and now. She does not yet understand that Jesus speaks of the living water that is God's spirit, the water referred to by the prophets of old⁵.

She does not yet realize the living water Christ offers is himself, his life, and his life-giving Spirit. It is the love of God Paul refers to in his letter to the Romans: "he has poured his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given to us". It is the River of Life that appears in Revelation, and it is the streams of living water that flow out of the life of the believer (John 7:38). Like precious water necessary for bodily life, it is the spiritual life-blood necessary for life in Christ.

⁵ References made to "living water" appear in Isaiah 44:3, Jer 2:13, Jer: 17:13, Zec 14:8. The prophet Jeremiah tells us God refers to Godself as the spring of living water (Jer 2:13). Isaiah speaks of God's promise to Israel: "For I will pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground. I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring and my blessing on your descendants" (Is 44:3).

This living water is the water of justice. When Christ engages the woman at the well, is an act of courage and a call to justice. In Christ, there is no gender barrier, in Christ, there is no religion barrier, in Christ, there is no sin barrier! Because in Christ we are all made new! In Christ we are all bathed in the river of justice. This river is described by the prophet Amos and echoed by many a great preacher: "Let justice roll down like a river, righteousness like a never ending stream" (Amos 5:24)

The well that never runs dry is the deep well of life in Christ. But let us not be fooled into thinking this is only the spiritual life. The deep well of life in Christ also nourishes our physical well being. The well that never runs dry flows like a river of justice and floods our hearts with the needs of our brothers and sisters.

Living Waters for the World is the global mission resource of the Presbyterian Church USA. Its mission is to enable churches to provide clean water to partners in need.

The project was first conceived in the early 90's by Wil Howie, a psychologist-turned-minister who believed we could literally bring life-giving, "living" waters to people in need throughout the world.

From this humble beginning, Living Waters for the World clean water systems have now been installed at 164 sites in 19 countries: Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Ghana, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, India, Kenya, Madagascar, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Philippines, Thailand, United States and Venezuela.

It is the hope and prayer of this psychologist-turned-minister that as we get our fiscal house in order, we here at Lake Highlands will be involved in humanitarian projects like this, to spread Christ's justice like a deep and flowing well, like a stream into a parched and dry land.

Christ models for us the work of justice that continues to this day. Poet Janet Morley captures the invitation of Christ in her words:

*Come to the waters
All you who are thirsty
Children who need water
Free from diseases
Women who need respite
From labour and searching,
Plans that need moisture
Rooted near the bedrock,*

Find here a living spring.

*O God, may we thirst
For your waters of justice
And learn to deny no one the water of life.*