

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

January 10, 2016

“A Warm Well Come”

Encountering Christ, part 2

John 4:7-26

You are in the right place this morning. Chances are, it was a real struggle to get here this morning – either because of the weather, or because of some spiritual battle that you and God alone know. But the fact remains, you are here, and you are not alone. We are the church when we are together, no matter the weather. So take a good look around you. These people sitting next to you, behind you, and in front of you, they are not perfect, but they are here to worship God together with you.

I invite you to stretch out your hands with your palms up as we pray this morning, as symbol that you are ready to receive something from God today. Let's pray.

God, you alone are good. You alone are worthy of praise. Forgive us for the times when we simply forget who you are. We want to worship you this morning with everything that we are. We ask that you come and meet us in this place this morning, that every part of our lives would be exposed before your holy fire, and that you would refine us to be more like your son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

When have you been really thirsty? I remember a day in Phoenix, Arizona, when Katja and I attempted to climb Camelback Mountain. It was about 9 o'clock in the morning, in June, the hottest part of the year in the desert southwest. Literally, every day that entire week had a high temperature of over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Between the two of us, we had one 8-ounce bottle of water and the

sun was rising. Fortunately, Katja had better sense than I, and after 100 feet or so, we turned back to the comfort of our air-conditioned car. If it had been up to me, I might have shriveled up like a raisin in the heat!

Water is important. It is a basic necessity for life. And there are few things worse than being physically thirsty. But I also believe we can be emotionally thirsty, spiritually thirsty. What things can we be spiritually thirsty for? Let's name some of them. (*Audience participation.*) Love. Acceptance. Forgiveness. A second chance. Community. Purpose. Peace. Contentment. Chocolate chip cookies. (OK, the last one doesn't count.)

In this sermon series, we are considering stories of people who encountered Christ. A lot of them were spiritually thirsty, longing for these very things we just named. The truth is, an encounter with Jesus changes us and provides us with the things we do thirst for spiritually. And after meeting Jesus, we desire to share these things with others, to quench their thirst as well.

I love this particular story in John chapter 4, about Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. This is a cross-cultural conversation. Have you ever had one of those? When I lived in Germany, I had a few. I had to ask lots of questions and listen to figure out what the person was saying. It was hard to understand someone whose customs were so different from my own. Sometimes those conversations were really funny, because of the misunderstandings and incorrect words, but they could also be frustrating. Frankly, a conversation about faith is also cross-cultural. And usually, the best place to start is by talking about something you both have in common, like being thirsty.

Jesus meets this Samaritan woman at the well. The scripture says, Jesus is tired, hot. He sees the woman coming, and so he asks her for water.

Maybe this simple request doesn't seem unusual to you, but then maybe you don't know about the extreme hatred between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans were the half-breed traitors who did everything backwards compared to the Jews. The Samaritans were the leftover people from northern kingdom of Israel who had been conquered and exiled into slavery by the Assyrians, some 700 years before Jesus' time. The Samaritans had intermarried and developed worship practices that were similar to Judaism, but in the eyes of a faithful Jew, were all wrong.

The Bible says these two cultures didn't associate with one another. (John 4:9) Literally, if you're a good Jew, you don't eat from the same dishes as Samaritans. You don't buy their products. You boycott the whole stinkin' country. In fact, Jesus' presence at the well is a complete surprise to begin with. John 4:4 says Jesus "had to go" through Samaria, but he could have taken the long way around the coast and avoided these enemies. But he doesn't. He sits down at the well, and he engages her in a conversation, starting with the simplest of things. "Can I have a drink?"

Now, in addition to the cultural divide, it was completely taboo for a man to talk to a woman. So naturally, she is surprised, and in fact, somewhat caustic. She points out, "Your kind don't associate with my kind. Jews and Samaritans? Men and women?" Allow me to paraphrase her reply: "Sir, is you crazy?"

But he has her attention. And he begins to speak about spiritual things. He says, "If you knew who I was, you would ask me for living water."

Well, she takes him literally, of course. She laughs. "Where will you get this 'living water?' You have no bucket, no rope."

This might be hard to understand in our modern day with plumbing and faucets. Archeology tells us this well was over 100 feet deep. It's not like asking someone at the table to pass the water pitcher. This is a major undertaking.

The woman still doesn't understand who Jesus is. "Who do you think you are? Are you better than Jacob, our great ancestor? He built this well, and his family used it." There is a note of challenge in her voice.

But Jesus doesn't give up. He presses on, focusing on the benefits of living water. "Drink here, and you'll be thirsty again. Drink living water, and you will never thirst." He's using metaphorical language, of course. This living water is abundant, vigorous, "springing-up." He is actually telling her about eternal life.

Well, she is intrigued, although still thinking literally. She thinks, "That would be great. I'd love to have this living water and stop coming here all the time."

Stop and think about this for a moment. Why is she even there? Well, obviously, to get water. But it should strike us as strange that she comes out at noon, the hottest part of the day, to draw water from a well over 100 feet deep. This is a serious effort, usually one that would require some help. So why come at midday, alone? Is she avoiding the rush? Or is she just plain avoiding people?

Jesus says, "Go call your husband and come back." (John 4:16) I believe her response indicates her true feelings. "I have no husband." Can you sense her shame? Her embarrassment? Not all is as it seems. All she can say is, "I have no husband." I'll bet she didn't even look Jesus in the eye as she said it.

The funny thing is, Jesus doesn't berate her. He doesn't accuse her. He tells her, "You told the truth." And then, prophetically, he speaks into her life.

“You have had five husbands, and you live with a man who is not your husband.”
(my paraphrase of John 4:17-18)

Here’s what I think Jesus means: “I know – you were divorced. Your first husband cheated on you. Afterwards, you thought, ‘It was his fault. Just my bad luck.’ Your second husband abused you, then left you. Then you started to think, ‘Maybe it’s me.’ Your life started to crumble. The third one didn’t work out. By the fourth and the fifth man, you didn’t care anymore. The talk was getting to you. The whispers. The people saying stuff behind your back. You couldn’t deal with it anymore. You were ashamed. You thought you were worthless, a failure. You came to the well alone, because at least it’s better than facing all of that.”

OK, that’s my interpretation. But the truth is, Jesus doesn’t point the finger. He just tells the truth. He’s working his way to redeem her.

Maybe this line of talk is getting too uncomfortable, so she changes the subject. “OK, I get it. I know you’re a prophet. Tell me something, Jew-man. My ancestors worshipped on this mountain. You Jews say we are supposed to worship in Jerusalem. Who is right?” (My paraphrase of John 4:19-20)

She is thinking, “Go ahead, tell me the Jews are right. Tell me I’m supposed to worship at the temple. Add more to my load. I’m a woman, so I can’t go in the inside of the temple. I’m a Samaritan, and foreigners aren’t allowed in, either. Go ahead, shoot me down, so I can fire back at you. At least I’ll have someone to blame. You are the reason I can’t get to God.”

But Jesus surprises her. He offers her living water, not excuses. “The Mountain versus the Temple? It’s neither-nor. Samaritans worship what you do not know. Jews worship what we know. Salvation – it is from the Jews, but it’s

open to all. The time has come for worshippers to seek God in Spirit and truth. That's who God seeks."

Spirit and truth. I want to make just one side note about those who claim that they don't have to go to church to worship God. I've been told, you can worship God in the woods. That's true on the surface. You can connect with God in nature. I do it all the time. But worshipping in isolation doesn't make disciples. Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ who transform the world. We can't do that alone. I'll accept that you can't be in church all the time. But you can be in truth and Spirit, and you can decide to make disciples together.

This is the truth this woman knows. She doesn't want her old life. She doesn't want to keep hiding. Her deepest longing, now that Jesus has revealed it, is to be saved. To have living water. To be redeemed. She says, "When the Messiah comes, he will explain everything." That's a sentence filled with hope. I can almost see her shaking with excitement. Is she setting herself up for disappointment again, or will this finally be the one she has been waiting for?

He sums up the whole gospel in one sentence. "I who speak to you am he."

The truth this morning is, Jesus is the Messiah, the savior of the world. He came for everyone. This is the truth that we need to preach from every Christian church. Jesus saves. Not Buddah. Not Mohamed. No New-Age fad. Jesus, and Jesus alone. Those are his words. He said it.

But how we deliver that message makes a world of difference. We can fight, accuse, point fingers, scoff. Or we can sit at the well and listen, speak truth, empowered by the Spirit, to call everyone to worship God.

Can I ask you, who is your Samaritan? Who are the people, if we are honest, we would rather avoid, cross the street, cross the country, than talk to ,

have to look into their face, meet their eyes? What do they do that drives us nuts? Their lifestyle? How they spend their money? Their lack of it? Their arrogance? Their addictions? Their personal preferences, their orientation? We are not condoning their choices. Jesus didn't affirm this woman's brokenness, he met her where she was. He sat down at the well and talked to her. He said, "I have something to offer you that the world doesn't. Hope. Life. Abundance. Joy. Living Water."

Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony. "He told me everything I ever did." No longer ashamed. Why would she engage the very people she sought to avoid, with the admission of her past? This is amazing.

Who is the Samaritan in your life? Who can you engage by sitting with them at the well? Who is thirsty for living water?

The truth is, when we encounter Jesus, everything is revealed to him. But instead of shame, we feel forgiveness. Instead of hate, we receive love. Instead of excuses, we find new life. Living water springing up inside our hearts.

As a church, we must commit to finding ways to spend some time at the well. The opportunities are all around us, if we pray and open our eyes. There is a youth center meeting weekly in our church with students who are desperate for someone to notice them, talk to them. The same goes for all those who gather at the Senior Center, Heritage Haus, and Meadow Brook. The names of those in our bulletin, every week, who are unable to leave their homes. This week, Gary Lockwood took at chance and got permission to build an ice skating rink right across the street from our church in the township park. We have a perfect opportunity to engage the community. Wherever you go, people are thirsty for

life. They are at your work. While you are shopping in the store. Waiting for your children to finish practice. Sitting next to you at the ball game. Thirsty for Christ. You can bring them to the water. All it takes is faith.

I want to close with the story of Desert Pete.

The following letter was found in a baking-power can wired to the handle of an old pump that offered the only hope of drinking water on a very long and seldom-used trail across Nevada's Amargosa Desert:

"This pump is all right as of June 1932. I put a new sucker washer into it and it ought to last five years. But the washer dries out and the pump has got to be primed. Under the white rock I buried a bottle of water, out of the sun and cork end up. There's enough water in it to prime the pump, but not if you drink some first. Pour about one-fourth and let her soak to wet the leather. Then pour in the rest medium fast and pump like crazy. You'll git water. The well has never run dry. Have faith. When you git watered up, fill the bottle and put it back like you found it for the next feller.

(signed) Desert Pete.

P.S. Don't go drinking the water first. Prime the pump with it and you'll git all you can hold.

By Keith Miller and Bruce Larson, *The Edge of Adventure*

Memory verse

"Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." John 4:14 (NIV)

Reflection questions

1. Reflect on a time when you were really thirsty. How did you quench your thirst?
2. When Jesus talks about “living water”, what does that mean to you? What types of spiritual thirst does Jesus quench in your life?
3. Have you ever encountered someone from a different culture? What did you talk about? Was there any awkwardness or misunderstanding?
4. “Sitting with the stranger at the well” is a metaphor for evangelism. Have you ever sat down with someone to talk about salvation?
5. Who in your life needs a drink of living water? How can you pray for them and share it with them?