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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Third Sunday in Lent (Series A)

March 23, 2014

Text: John 4:5–26

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

From all appearances, it was a chance meeting between Jesus and an unnamed Samaritan woman. They just happen to meet coincidentally at an opportune time. Not on your life! Nothing is coincidental with Jesus. Our Lord has a divine appointment to keep. And we're privileged to join in and hear the conversation.

Jesus was traveling through the northern region of Israel. He stopped in the town of Sychar, some 10 or so miles southeast of Samaria, the once capital city of Israel's Northern Kingdom. It was midday and hot. John even records, in vs. 6, that Jesus was wearied with the traveling. Stopping at Jacob's famous well for a quick breather, Jesus sent His disciples into town to buy lunch (vs. 8). That's when things become interesting.

Right on schedule, a woman carrying a water-jug comes walking up to the well. I tend to imagine the woman giving Jesus an awkward glance, a strange man just sitting there. There must have been an even more awkward silence as she began to lower her jug into the well to draw water. Jesus speaks, "Give me a drink" (vs. 7). At that moment, it went from awkward to downright bizarre. Look at the woman's response, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (vs. 9). And just in case John's readers don't realize how awkward this conversation is, John adds a little more information parenthetically, "For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." There it is! Respectable Jewish men don't talk to Samaritan women.

This outlandish scene doesn't really shock our 21st century sensibilities (men and women talk with each other all the time in public) but it certainly would have scandalized 1st century Jewish and Samaritan sensibilities. In general, men and women didn't talk to each other in public back in those days. If a man needed to say anything of importance to a woman, he should go talk to her husband or her father. A widow who had neither surviving husband nor father might receive a few more liberties. But a young Jewish man speaking to a young woman was questionable at best. But what makes this situation even more bizarre is that Jesus is not only talking

to a woman but to a woman of Samaria, that historic region of half-blooded, compromising idolaters. Polite Jewish society would have viewed such a meeting as well – ick! Any self-respecting Jewish man would have left such ignominious company immediately.

But Jesus came to Sychar to meet this woman. Though He's asked her for a drink of water, our Lord's greater purpose is to give her living water. Vs. 10, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." Jesus is a master of using the situation at hand in order to proclaim His purpose of saving the world. The woman came to get water from a well, let's use water as a means of proclaiming the gospel.

Jesus offers her living water. Her curiosity is peaked. "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" (vs. 11). At this point, the woman is thinking only in natural, normal ways. Living water usually referred to water flowing in a river, spring, or fountain. The woman knows there aren't any such sources around Sychar. So, where do you get this flowing water? Life would be so much easier!

The woman is engaged in the conversation; her interest is peaked. Jesus now tells her His real purpose in asking for a drink in the first place. Vs. 13–14, "Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'"

This "living water" promised by Jesus isn't given in order to make earthly life easier or more convenient but to renew hearts and minds and to make eternal life possible. The living water of Jesus is the blessed Holy Spirit that comes from Jesus. The Spirit brings the water of life, welling up from within a person, leading to eternal life. Sound good? I hope it does.

We, like the Samaritan woman of old, ask Jesus, "Give me this water..." (vs. 15). But do we understand what Jesus is promising? The woman didn't. She's still thinking about the convenience of a river or spring, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water" (vs. 15). Do we expect Jesus to make life easy like the infamous health, wealth, and prosperity preachers of the past few decades? Jesus, give me that living water so that I don't have to visit doctors or worry

about paying bills; so that I can plan vacations, expand my living arrangements and enjoy all that prosperity has to offer.

The promised, living water comes to us straight from Good Friday and Easter through baptism and the gospel. Do you ever feel thirsty in your soul? Do you ever long to know God in a transcendent, majestic, powerful way? The psalmist writes, in Psalm 42, “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?” The Lord created us to long for, to thirst after His holy presence.

Saint Augustine, who lived in the 5th century, famously said that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. Without a living, vital relationship with God, our hearts and minds become restless, seeking fulfillment too often in things and activities that will not satisfy, or at best will satisfy only temporarily. Sometimes those things are sinful but not always.

The Samaritan woman thought a stream or fountain would make life better. But Jesus says she’ll be thirsty again. Her restless, thirsty soul would only find lasting refreshment in Him. He alone gives cleansing forgiveness. He fills people with the Holy Spirit; He gives joy that surpassed human understanding; He satisfies the restless soul.

Many Christian writers and thinkers wonder about the future of Christianity. The center of Christianity is shifting from Europe and North America to Africa and South America. Europe and North America have all the money but Christianity found in the southern hemisphere is experiencing explosive growth and expansion, sometimes in the face of Islamic opposition. Why there and not here? The living waters of the gospel are flowing abundantly; it appears, in historically non-Christian lands while the flow of living water seems to have slowed to a trickle in Christendom.

In light of this shift, some are advocating that we abandon our liturgies, hymnals, and prayer books. It’s time to seek a simpler, more authentic form of Christianity that stresses the experiential rather than the doctrinal. These same folks say that precise doctrine is a hindrance to the Church; it’s time to emphasize spirituality over knowledge and doctrine. To put it more bluntly, many thinkers are advocating that historic Christianity (like Lutheranism, etc) needs to become Pentecostal. That’s where the living waters are flowing.

I think all such discussion largely ignores what Jesus is teaching in John 4. I know I'm skipping some verses in today's reading but the Samaritan woman talks with Jesus about where is the right place to worship God. Jews say in Jerusalem, Samaritans say on Mt. Gerizim (vs. 20). Jesus dismisses all such geographic notions of the Church. Look at vs. 21–24:

²¹Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

Why is there amazing growth in some parts of the world and not others? That's up to Jesus. He builds His Church when and where He pleases. Our concern is fidelity to Him and He calls us to worship God the Trinity in spirit and truth. You can't have non-doctrinal Christianity. Or to put it positively, true, authentic, pure Christianity seeks the Spirit-filled living waters of truth in the heart, mind, emotion, imagination, and intellect *as well as* daily experiencing Jesus and His people according to that truth.

St. Paul joins doctrine and experience together in today's epistle reading (Rom 5:1-2), “¹Therefore since we have been justified by faith (that's doctrine, justification, atonement, Christology, etc...), we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (that's the daily experience of Christ through faith). ²Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (vs. 2 combines spirit and truth together inseparably).

The experience of Jesus is found where the truth of Jesus is; through the gospel of Jesus, the daily life of experiencing Jesus is granted. Spirit and truth come together in Jesus. Come, let us drink deeply and fully in the life-giving waters of Scripture and Sacraments for they give us Jesus in spirit and truth along with all the hope and experiences of His grace. May our restless souls find rest in Jesus

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.