

Sermon

Lent III

March 27, 2011

John 4:5-42

The Women at the Well

The Water of Life

The other day, someone forwarded me one of those inspirational e-mails. At the end of the message a Thomas Kinkade painting appeared, full of light and the bright colors he likes, and also, with the magic of the internet, there was a sparkling, glittering stream of water actually moving through the village featured in the painting. I don't remember much of the message except for the last line which said that the picture contained a miracle. Quite a claim for an e-mail!

But It caught my attention—having meditated for two weeks about the metaphor of living water and knowing I would speak to you today about the water of life—Jesus's metaphor for the source of the life of spirit and truth.

What does this water of life look like and taste like?—the water that gives hope and healing and eternal life? What

We each can remember when we were very thirsty—after a long hike for example. When I first traveled to the Grand Canyon with the 8th graders at our school-- we hiked down into the canyon about a mile and a half and of course which meant a mile and a half back up of difficult hiking. One of the students had neglected to take enough water, or at least had already enjoyed

hers before the trip back up. On the way up, she was struggling and another teacher and I gave her our remaining water. By the time I was at the top, I wasn't dehydrated or in danger, but I was thinking of life-giving water and **obsessed** with the thought of what that cool water would taste like. It was offered to me by our guide and my first sip was one of pure ecstasy.

As our Gospel begins, Jesus is also **thirsty** and this prompts an incredible conversation with the woman he meets at the well. It is a dynamic dialogue full of questions, and Jesus's challenging metaphors. The passage is full of detail about Jesus and the unnamed woman from Samaria. Jesus is tired; Jesus is hungry; Jesus is thirsty—just like you and I might be after a long walk, a long day's work, or after preaching a sermon—or listening to one! (I know I am thankful for this glass of water in the pulpit!) We also know the time of the encounter--noon, the place—an important place, a life-giving place—the well of their ancestor Jacob.

The writer skillfully presents it as a drama—perhaps like a three act play, one that has discrete scenes and character changes and movements.

We can surmise it is no accident that Jesus meets this unnamed woman. He has walked through Samaria on purpose and he knows this woman will be there, even though it appears on the surface that he strikes up a conversation

with a stranger, when he sits down to rest, similar to what we might do while waiting in line for a cold drink. He appears to rely on the kindness of a stranger to give him a drink of water to refresh him after his long walk

But we remind ourselves this is not a chance encounter. Jesus does not do anything by chance. He knew she would be there—the only time of the day such a woman **could** be there. And through these details of time and geography-- our gospel writer sets the scene for a powerful moment of redemption and salvation and reconciliation. Jesus once again is pushing the envelope, shaking the foundations of the establishment by talking to a Samaritan, who is also a woman, and a woman of questionable reputation.

The passage illustrates the personal relationship Jesus often formed with the stranger or the outcast. These two banter back and forth and I hear a teasing tone in her voice as she points out that Jesus does not even have a bucket, even though he is promising her some very special water; then they debate their differences in belief about where one should worship. As they talk, she is not afraid to argue with him. But the metaphor of the water—the water of the Holy Spirit and of Truth-- suddenly brings their bantering and their legal debate over worship moves to a higher level of how to **live** the life of the Spirit. It is no longer important who has broken the rules or follows

the rules or even what the rules are. They begin to discuss the purpose of life—how to live into a good life—and the advent of the Messiah. This is all in the context of the age-old conflict of the division between the Jews and the Samaritans which these two represent and that Jesus begins to bridge.

When Jesus calls her out on having had five husbands and living with a man who is not her husband—I hear slight scorn in her voice laced with her embarrassment, when she says, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.” A stranger to her, she realizes he knows too much about her personal story, which is probably very well known by her acquaintances in the surrounding countryside.

In that moment of revelation, something changes in her when she says, “I see you are a prophet”—it is a pivotal point in her life and a pivotal moment in this very long Gospel lesson that continues to take us both deeper and higher into the meaning of human life and our relationships and explores our connection with the Divine.

Her shift comes as she begins **to at least want to believe** what Jesus is saying that he is the Messiah; she is disturbed enough to forget her water

jar, go back to her village and tell others what has happened, still incredulously asking, “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

Even though she is at first a skeptic, she herself becomes the messenger, the prophet, who brings the news of Jesus, and then the Messiah himself, into the midst of her community where he remains for two days, breaking another ancient taboo about these groups mingling with each other. In these two days, Jesus brings many Samaritans into the fold and shares with them the living water of the spirit, spreading the good news that God’s love is for all people.

A new thing is truly happening! Jesus is the vehicle of this transformation. And who aids Jesus as an agent of salvation? It is the woman! The Samaritan woman. And it happens at the noon of the day—in the bright sunlight, not during the dark of night as in last week’s Gospel when the righteous Nicodemous decides to visit Jesus. We never find out what Nicodemous did with his information. But we know that something miraculous happens to the woman and she acts upon this miracle.

She is converted! She is transformed into a new being. Even if she at first does not understand the meaning of the “Water of Life” metaphor, she experiences it.

The woman draws deeply from the well of Jesus’s presence with her and taps into that flowing river, of life-giving water which he offers. She becomes redeemed of her sin, of her past life—no longer having to hide it but instead sharing it openly with her neighbors as her story of salvation. She becomes reconciled to her past and finds reconciliation in her community. Her Messiah, her savior, has come.

The woman’s story is powerful enough. But this gospel is not only packed with her conversion but with a larger possibility. Through the individual witness of the woman, many are now able to come to the realization that the Messiah is here right now and that God’s Kingdom has come on earth for everyone. The story places us at a crossroads with the possibility that the reconciliation of two ancient enemies is not beyond our imagining.

A friend once told me this story about his Lebanese Christina grandmother and a Muslim woman who lived in a neighboring village, and I have always

connected it to this gospel. For me, it is an incredible story of reconciliation and salvation, both for individuals and, I believe, for the world.

My friend Vince's grandmother who I will call Eva, lived in a small village near Beirut, close to the sea and to the markets which were the lifeblood of existence, where goods and services were traded in this region. A Shiite Muslim community was located a little further inland. By custom and tradition the Muslims had permission to travel through the Christian village, but not stop, on their way to the markets close to the Mediterranean Sea.

The young woman became familiar with the faces of these people—neighbors, if you will-- as they walked through weekly—on their arduous 10 hour trip. One woman in particular caught her eye because she was close in age and had young children like herself.

They began to acknowledge one another with a glance or a nod or a quick wave but nothing more. It was historically, tribally, culturally and religiously the tradition to avoid contact with one another—it was not allowed or probably even considered. At one point, Eva realized that the young Muslim woman was very pregnant and struggling as she moved through the village. She was exhausted and in distress. Eva went

immediately to her, brought her into her home to rest and **gave her a drink of water.**

After that day, defying ancient tradition that no one even knew why it had ever been established, when the young woman made her way through the village, Eva would invite the woman in to visit. That one drink of **living water** made a friend out of an enemy.

There is another chapter to this story too—continuing the chain of conversion and transformation and transformation.

When WWI broke out, the Turkish army occupied the mountain areas of Lebanon. They conscripted the Muslim men in to the Turkish army and forced the Christian men to do hard labor. The Turkish army bivouacked their troops in the Christian village and seized virtually all the crops and food for the troops. Malnutrition and sometime starvation become common. Since all of the men were gone from the village, Eva and her six children were left to fend for themselves.

It was at this time that another miracle happened because of that first drink of living water that Eva had offered. The Shiite woman lived in an isolated area unaffected by the troops. Putting herself in danger, she came to Eva's

house and asked Eva and her six children to come and live with them— which they did for almost a year. My friend Vince said that both his grandmother and his father, who was one of those six children, attribute their survival to this young Muslim woman. They remained friends for the rest of their lives.

What is the message in this story—the inspiration? What is the inspiration—for us today—**of this powerful Gospel passage and of my friend’s story--**— real-life dramas crossing all divides of time and region and belief in the Holy? There is much here to be fed and watered by!

One of my favorite spiritual mentors from another religious tradition is Thich Nant Hanh. His teachings are simple, but worthy, and stay with me, both in my head and heart, and inspire me as I think of reconciliation and the life of the spirit. He says, “*One drop of that compassionate water has the power to heal the world.*” One drop of living water—Thich Nant Hanh says.

What is our one drop that we can share? What is my offering? What is yours? What is the relationship in my life—in yours—that needs healing

and reconciliation? What needs to be forgiven? Maybe it is ourselves. Or maybe it is that life-long enemy.

In this broken and hurting world, can we open our eyes to see and offer to others the living water that God has offered and revealed to us? Can we look across vast man-made divides and through faith love and action, “water: a new creation into being? Can we imagine and dream that reconciliation is possible? Individually and globally. Can we water it into existence? And not only water it into existence but give it abundant life—creating a flourishing and abundant garden for all to share. And don’t be mistaken--This is not computer-generated sparkling water—this is the real thing.

I remember Bishop Bennett Sims used to say, “*If Christians won’t do this—and he meant--commit themselves to peace and reconciliation—then who will.*” Those are powerful words. As Christians, to offer of living, loving, compassionate water is at the heart of our religion and our Gospel.

If we won’t live this way and offer the water of life to ourselves, one another, and our brothers and sisters throughout the world, then who will?

Amen.