

“Thirsty”
John 4:5-42; Exodus 17:1-7
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Thanksgiving 1991. It's one I won't soon forget. It was the first Thanksgiving that we celebrated in our new house, the one we still live in. Brandon was 4 ½, Annie was 3 ½, and Kendall was due to make her appearance in about two weeks. We didn't even know that she was Kendall yet, the nurses had told us that they were “pretty sure” that she was a he and so we were getting ready to call the baby “Craig.” In any case, Erin wasn't in the best shape to spend the day on her feet cooking and so her friend Susan volunteered to come up from St. Louis and make the holiday dinner. Now Susan fancies herself a gourmet cook and so this was serious business. I think Susan also wanted to come hoping that Kendall would put in an early appearance and she'd get to be there for the event. So Susan came and we started to get ready for a great Thanksgiving feast and that's when the storm hit. Not a problem, Susan was already there and we weren't going anywhere as long as Erin didn't go into labor, so we settled down the night before Thanksgiving and watched it snow and snow and snow. And then on Thanksgiving morning, the power went out. No power. What were we going to do? Well, we made it an adventure for the kids. We had plenty of candles and lanterns, we could cook on the stove-top because we have a gas stove and plenty of matches, we had a woodburning stove to keep the house warm, so we did ok. For a while. Because what we also have is a well. And that meant that we had no water. No water. When you don't have water, it quickly can become a crisis. These young children that we had taught so well to flush each time they used the bathroom, now we told them not to. And how would we cook and wash dishes and give water to the dogs? And as good as other things are to drink, when you are really thirsty, there is nothing like a tall glass of water.

Nutritionists tell me that I should have 64 ounces of water every day, 8 eight ounce glasses to stay healthy. If you don't, you're thirsty. We need water. So did Jesus. He and his disciples had been walking through the countryside when they came to the city of Sychar. We think that town was near

the ancient city of Shechem, the town that Abraham and Sarah knew and the place where Jacob lived for a while. But they've been walking all morning and now it is noon, the sun is high in the sky and Jesus waits by the well for his friends to come back from the town. And like any man would be, he's thirsty. A woman approaches the well with a bucket to draw water. That she comes at noon is strange, because normally the women of the town would all come together early in the day so they can socialize as well as help each other with the water and then they can have their water to begin their daily tasks. Perhaps this woman comes alone and later because she is not well received by the other women of the town. Perhaps she has done something wrong.

And Jesus asks her for a drink. A natural thing to do, right? No, not right. A single man would not even speak to an unaccompanied woman in those days. And a Jewish man would certainly not speak to a Samaritan woman. It was unheard of. The surprise is evident in the woman's voice: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me?" But he's thirsty. We don't always recognize the humanity of Jesus. Just like any other person, he got thirsty. He needed to drink, to eat, to sleep, he needed the same things that we do. He was a human being, he was fully human. He was thirsty.

But so was she. She was thirsty. But not just for water. But as Jesus tells her that everyone who drinks from the water in Jacob's well will be thirsty again, but those that drink of the water that Jesus gives will never thirst again.. That peaks her interest. Some kind of magic water that she would drink and never thirst again! And she wouldn't have the embarrassment of coming to the well alone or to face the accusing looks of the other women of the town. But then he says, "Go and call your husband." That's when she begins to think that this is not just about water. She has no husband. She's had five husbands, Jesus points out, and the one she lives with now is not her husband. Because she has been thirsty, thirsty for love, for acceptance, for meaning, for intimacy, for security, even for truth. And she has not found it. She's found herself at this point in her life alone at midday at the well, still longing for something that she has a hard time admitting what it is.

When Jesus declares that the man she is with is not her husband, the Samaritan woman realizes

suddenly that she is face to face, not only with Jesus, but with truth itself. "I perceive you are a prophet!" she exclaims.

A prophet speaks truth, for sure. But a prophet also scares us with such truth. Here is Jesus, offering living water, but that water comes in an awesome package: It is packaged in a truth that reveals us as who we truly are. And that's not always a comfortable thing.

The Episcopal bishop Samuel Candler of Atlanta comments about this passage:

When I was in divinity school, long ago now, I participated in the usual theological discussions that led to fascinating mind games sometimes. I was in school with all sorts of Christians, not just with those of my own denomination. And our denominations disagreed on some important matters, including matters like baptism itself. A frequent question was asked of one of our professors. Maybe you have asked it, too. Some folks baptize in the river, we noted, and some folks baptize with just a few drops of water. And so we asked, "How much water does one need for a valid baptism? How much water is sufficient?"

Our professor looked at us seriously, maybe just as seriously as Jesus looked at that Samaritan woman at the well. Our professor put down his pen and said, "A valid baptism needs as much water as it would take to drown in."

Drown in? What a scary thought! We thought baptisms were supposed to be joyous and happy and renewing! No, he reminded us. Baptism also involves death itself. Baptism means dying to the old life and being born again. One needs enough water, symbolically, to remind us that something is dying here. That is the truth of what we do.

"Sir, give me a drink. Give me some of this living water." The request of the Samaritan woman is our request today. Give me something that will stay with me, that will keep me alive.

But Jesus' answer speaks an awesome truth to the woman. Jesus' answer is spirit and truth. Jesus'

answer is that living water comes very close to being deadly water. Yes, you may drink of this water, but this water will show you the truth about yourself and the truth about your world. That truth may overwhelm you. It may come close to killing you with its clarity.

But it is alive. It is alive with spirit and truth.¹

All this started with Jesus asking for a drink because he is thirsty. There is one other time that Jesus says he is thirsty. Do you remember? On Good Friday, on the cross itself, Jesus says, "I thirst." Does he thirst for water? Or like us, does he thirst for something else? For his friends who have abandoned him, for hope, for meaning, for truth, for love, just one last time? Don't we all thirst for those things? And when our spirit thirsts for those things they cannot be satisfied with water, or with food, or with things, or with sex, or with human acclaim, but only by the spirit of God that Jesus speaks of. God is spirit and those who worship God must worship him in spirit and truth. It is a matter of life and death. Or rather of death and life. For to receive that living water, the old life must go and a new life, a new creation must come.

Notice the change in the woman at the well. She runs back to the city and speaks to the people who before would not speak to her, telling them, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done." Notice what she does not say also. Notice that she says, he like all of you, know the bad things I've done. But she doesn't say, but what she means is, and he accepts me anyway. He loves me anyway. And she's no longer thirsty. So Jesus does with us. So we can do with one another.

¹ Candler, Samuel. Day 1, *Give Me a Drink*. February 27, 2005