

Sunday Sermon
March 19, 2017
“Living Water”
John 4:5-26

Introduction

I have shared how the first call I served after my ordination was in the mountains of East Tennessee. We lived in Johnson City, where my husband pastored. I pastored a church 14 miles away, a 20-minute drive through the mountains, back up a creek, in a hollow, at the foot of the mountains that separate Tennessee and North Carolina.

In other words, my people worshiped God, like their ancestors, on the mountain; and Bill’s people worshiped God in the city. And there were differences. For example, his parishioners were baptized in the sanctuary, sprinkled with water from a font. My parishioners chose to be baptized across the road in the cold, fast-flowing water of the creek that streamed down from the top of the mountain.

Differences created by natural boundaries. There have always been boundaries, mountains, oceans or rivers, that separate people. Over my years in ministry, I have traveled back and forth over mountains, through tunnels, over big and little bridges, and through remote areas on the back side of nowhere. Wherever I have been, I have learned there are certain routes you take at certain times of the day. There are certain areas you avoid, especially at night if you are alone. And I have learned it is important always to know where is the nearest filling station, the closest “watering hole.”

I

Jesus and his disciples are traveling from the north of Palestine to the south, from Galilee to Judea. And the shortest route, the one that took only three days, is through Samaria. But that means leaving Palestine and going through the territory of those persons despised for so many generations by the Jews, the Samaritans.

On their way through Samaria, they come to a watering hole, Jacob’s well. It stands to this day at a fork where the road splits to go to two cities. It is about noon, it is hot, and Jesus is tired and thirsty. So he sends his disciples into a nearby town to get food, and he sits down at the well to rest.

I remember once driving through the rural low lands of South Carolina in the heat of summer, and my car overheated. I walked into the community gathering place, their watering hole, a convenience store on the edge of a little town, and I asked for coolant. The people sitting around did not have to say a word. Their looks said it, “You’re not from around here, are you? You’re not one of us.”

Jesus is at a well, hot and thirsty, but with no means by which to draw water. So he asks a Samaritan woman for a drink. “I am a Samaritan,” she says, “You are a Jew. How is it that you ask a drink from me?”

She is female; she is Samaritan. And we learn later in John’s account she has a past. So we understand why she is at the well by herself in the heat of the day. She is there to avoid the whispered comments and critical looks of those who gather there each morning. And this man, a Jewish rabbi, asks her to give him a drink of water. It just was not done.

It was like a Duke student asking a North Carolina student for a ride to the ballgame. Or a South Carolina student asking a Clemson student to introduce him to his sister. It just is not done.

But Jesus says to the woman, “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.”

II

Living water, not stagnant well water, but flowing spring water. After our time in east Tennessee, much of our ministries have been served in hurricane areas. After big storms when clean water has been scarce and precious, we have gathered to help unload trucks with supplies sent by generous and caring people, and we would sort the water.

Sometimes there would be old milk jugs filled with water from someone’s tap or well with a note written on the side of the jug saying, “We are praying for you.” Then there would be jugs of tasteless, distilled water. And then there would be the sparkling jugs marked, “pure, fresh spring water.” And we would say, “This is the good stuff.” And we would stick a jug over to the side to save for ourselves.

Jesus tells the woman, “Everyone who drinks of the water in this well will thirst again. But whoever drinks of the water that I shall give will never thirst; the water that I shall give will become in that person a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

And the woman says, “Give me some of that good water, so that I do not have to be thirsty again. Give me some of that water, so that I will never have to come here like this again.” This was a woman who is truly thirsty.

Jesus says to her, “Go get your husband. And she says, “I have no husband.” And when Jesus remarks about five husbands and a man with whom she is living who is not her husband, notice what she does. She changes the subject. She shifts the attention from herself to a church-related question.

“Where is the proper place to worship?” she asks. “We Samaritans say Mt. Gerizim; you Jews say Jerusalem.” We do that. It is a lot easier to talk church business than to face the truth about ourselves and our spiritual needs.

But Jesus says, “God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship both in spirit and truth.” It is not where you worship; it is not the style of worship. God seeks worship that leads you to confront truth about yourself and experience life offered in the Spirit.

III

In a baking powder 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 a Nevada desert, the following note was found: “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.

In our journeys through deserts, we need a filling station, a watering hole. But too often we have a difficult time trusting that there really is water in the well, good water that will quench our thirst and never run dry. And too often we do not share it.

Conclusion

Just when we think we have our world settled with boundaries we want, here comes Jesus, breaking down barriers, exposing us for who we really are, telling us we are to worship God in spirit and in truth. And then offering us the good water.

Every time I drive up to the sign at the bottom of the hill that says “First Presbyterian Church,” I think, “Here is a watering hole, a spring with living water where everyone is welcome, a place where you can go, no matter who you are or where you are from, and you can find relief for your thirsty soul.”

Perhaps you have come to this place of worship, this watering hole, on this third Sunday in Lent, looking for relief for a dry, parched soul. Know this: The one who brings the living waters of eternal life has come among us. There really is water in the well. It will not run dry. You can admit your failures, your sins, and your thirst will be quenched.