

“A SPRING OF WATER GUSHING UP”

John 4:5-42

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Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

A funny story about today’s sermon: I’d intended to incorporate some verses from Ephesians 5 into our service, particularly the one where Paul writes that Christians are supposed to “walk as children of light.” In the preaching plan Jerry and I had made, this was the thematic thread we were going to use to tie together the stories from John’s gospel that we’re reflecting on during Lent. But when I was putting the service together, I just couldn’t make it work. The water imagery of the John text featured prominently in every prayer, every song I came up with, and the image of light fit in without a muddle of metaphors. So I decided, for this week, to just leave it out.

And then, as I was researching the John passage, I came across something I’d forgotten about: Eastern Christianity has preserved and passed on ancient stories about this woman of Samaria. She is said to have become an evangelist and preacher, to have converted (and baptized) a daughter of the Emperor Nero, and to have died, eventually, as a Christian martyr. And at some point, she took on, or was given, the name Phontaine, which means... “luminous one.” So there you have it: the connection with light!

The woman Jesus met at that well in Samaria, consistent with her eagerness to tell her neighbors about him, “walked in the light” and went on to carry the light of Christ across boundaries as significant as the one Jesus crossed to talk with her.

Who knows how much of that is fact, but traditions often do contain a kernel of truth, and this one reflects an awareness that women played a bigger role in early Christianity than the Western Church has acknowledged. For me, it also prompts a bit of anger about the way this woman’s story has been told in the protestant world – mostly focusing on her multiple marriages and her supposedly immoral reputation. It’s a shame that view took hold so firmly, since its basis in the text is questionable and because it distracts from the richness of this text.

This is Jesus’ longest one-on-one conversation recorded in the gospels, even longer than the one with Nicodemus in the previous chapter. There’s no reason to doubt it’s based on a real encounter, but as John tells it (and John is the only gospel writer who tells this story) it is also, like Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, full of symbolic meaning and imagery. When I study this story – one of my favorites – I hardly know where to look. There’s SO much here.

This week, I was particularly drawn to the part of the conversation about thirst and water.

Now, thirst is a good thing. It tells you that your body needs water. “Water is life” isn’t just a slogan, it’s a fact. Human beings can only survive about three days without water. And you’ll feel the effects of not drinking enough water – like headache or dizziness – in a much shorter time. Sometimes I get busy doing something and forget to drink the water I have sitting beside me on my desk. I’m distracted and don’t even notice that I’m thirsty until all of a sudden I realize that my head hurts a little bit and I’m kind of cranky. Fortunately, when that happens, it’s easily remedied.

We who live in a Great Lakes state and with plenty of water coming from our faucets every day tend to take water for granted. But it's not that way everywhere. Water is precious, and where clean, safe water is scarce or requires a lot of effort to get, people really know that. This is probably part of the reason that across cultures and centuries, water's been considered sacred in itself *and* is also a powerful spiritual symbol. I don't think we can fully grasp what John's trying to convey in this fourth chapter without appreciating this.

If *water* has both physical and spiritual meaning, so does its counterpart, *thirst*. This whole scene revolves around thirst. Jesus and the woman he meets at the well are both there because they share what all humans share – the need for water. It transcends the boundaries and barriers of culture, religion, and gender that separate them. And it quickly becomes the segue to a surprisingly honest, respectful, and theological conversation about thirst of a spiritual nature, and how we satisfy it.

Jesus sees in this woman what we forget sometimes to see in each other - or even in ourselves – that we are all thirsting for something, often something we can't quite name. It's part of the human condition.

Some of us might be thirsty for knowledge or for adventure.

We might be thirsty for notice or recognition or understanding.

We might be thirsty for freedom from whatever is constraining us,
or for a life with more free-flowing joy.

Some of us are thirsty for healing and wholeness of body or mind.

Many in our world are thirsty for justice.

Others are thirsty for relief from an endless grind of work, worry, and struggle.

Some are thirsty for peace in the midst of stress or rest from busyness.

Maybe somebody is thirsty for connection and belonging.

Somebody else might be thirsty for meaning and purpose,
and another might be thirsty for a faith that feels alive and authentic.

Lots of people may not even know that their thirst is a thirst for God.

Just as it can be dangerous to ignore our physical thirst, not paying attention to our spiritual thirstiness isn't good for us either. It's hard to quench a thirst you aren't aware of. If we don't attend to, recognize, and *name* what it is we are thirsting for, in our souls, we're likely to continue to be parched. We won't reach out for what we need. We won't be open to the living water of

God's grace, the bubbling spring of God's Spirit, the new life that Jesus wants to nourish in us. We won't flourish as we were meant to do.

When Jesus mentions "living water" that satisfies thirst, the Samaritan woman responds as if he's still talking about actual water, magic water, maybe, that could take the place of the well water. Most commentators say that she misunderstands him, but I'm not convinced of that. Her response seems more like that of someone not quite yet willing to acknowledge a deeper need. You know what I mean: If we keep talking about the water – the wet stuff – and the well and the bucket, I can avoid thinking about those needs that are harder to articulate and harder to meet.

But Jesus *sees* this woman. I'm not sure we can know exactly what he saw or understood about her life. We don't know what happened to her husbands or how she's been treated or what choices she had. It seems evident that she's had more than her share of sorrow and disappointment. But whatever she's been through, it hasn't robbed her of her spirit. We can tell from the conversation that she's thoughtful and knowledgeable about her faith. And we sense that she's a seeker, thirsty for... something more than life has given her.

Jesus sees her – not with judgement of her life or her faith tradition or her status or anything else – he simply sees *her*. Jesus sees her and she responds to him like a slightly drooping plant responds to a nice rain. Suddenly her life and her disappointments and her sadness and her needs and her hopes aren't invisible or unimportant. She matters. And to top it off, Jesus reveals to her that he is the promised Messiah that both the Samaritans and the Jews have waited for. She's the first person he's said this to, so we the readers know that this is a momentous conversation. She drinks it in, and we see that new life begin to emerge.

Just as James and John and Peter and Andrew leave their boats and nets to follow Jesus, Photine leaves her water jar behind and runs to tell her neighbors about this man she's met, and the astounding possibility that he could be the One sent from God. Something about what she says or how she says it strikes a chord with them; maybe they can see a new life bubbling up in her, more even than we can see from John's account. They come to see Jesus, and hear him, for themselves. So she becomes an evangelist, a bearer of the light of light and a carrier of living water to others. It's not so hard to imagine, really, that this is not the only time in her life when she'll take on that calling.

There's a little bit in this text that makes me think this might have been only the start. It's Jesus' promise of "a spring of water gushing up" into new life. Just like a close study of Nicodemus' story shows us that Jesus is not inviting us to engage in a one-and-done transaction to get a pass into heaven, this conversation doesn't suggest a single experience of grace. It's something much more generous and life-transforming: a continual stream of love and strength and hope and *presence* filling us up and overflowing into a message of good news we can share.

I don't think the take away here is that we're never going to experience spiritual thirst again. It seems to me that's part of being human. But the life-giving grace of Christ is not a trickle; it's a spring *gushing up* in us, renewing our spirits every day. We don't have to be thirsty. Drink deeply, regularly, constantly of the grace of Christ. There is plenty and it's for you.