

"The Water of Life"

John 4:5-26

March 27, 2011

3rd Sunday In Lent

We've had a long and cold winter. Spring hasn't yet brought us much warm weather. So, today, I would like you to imagine in your mind a hot summer day. Think of how it is when you are out in that hot summer sun – doing lawn work, walking in the park, golfing and so on. You get hotter and you begin to sweat. Your mouth becomes dry and you become so, so thirsty.

Then picture a pitcher of ice cold water. You pour yourself a glass and take a nice long drink of that cold, cold water. Remember how good that feels – how satisfying? It is truly a delight. However, there is one problem with this satisfying beverage: it cannot prevent thirst from happening again. In that hot, hot sun, you will get thirsty again. Then you find out that water cannot truly satisfy your thirst; it can only quench it temporarily. Wouldn't it be nice if, in that hot summer sun, you could have water that, when you drink it, satisfies your thirst so that you're never ever thirsty again?

That is the scenario in our Gospel reading for today. Jesus and His disciples are passing through Samaria on his way to Galilee. They stop at Jacob's well, near the town of Sychar. The disciples go into town to buy food while Jesus remains behind. Jesus is sitting at the well when a Samaritan woman comes to draw water.

It was noon, during the heat of the day, so Jesus asks the woman for a drink of water. The woman is shocked. The Jews and Samaritan were bitter enemies. Plus, Jesus was a man and men never talked to women in public. So, the woman says, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" Yet Jesus is thirsty and in need of a drink and the water of Jacob's well would be just the right thing.

This scenario is a metaphor for our lives. We don't live in a Garden of Eden, free from care or need. We live under the hot sun of sin in a corrupt world. Our souls are thirsty. We have needs and desires in this life. We look for ways to satisfy that thirst. We find many good things in our lives to

meet our needs and satisfy our desires: money, new and better technology, food and drink, house and home, spouse and children, and all our possessions. We desire these things. We work for these things. We make it the highest priority to have these things. We desperately desire to have our thirst quenched and we believe these things will do the trick.

Back at the well, it is a teaching moment for Jesus with this woman. When she balks at giving him a drink of water, Jesus says, “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.” The woman doesn’t get this. She thinks Jesus is talking about regular water. She wants to know how he’s going to draw out that water without a bucket. She wants to debate whether Jesus’ water is better than the water of the well of Jacob, the great patriarch of Israel. Finally, Jesus gets to the point of his analogy about living water. He says, “Everyone who drinks off this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever.” This physical water in the well is good, but it has limitations. It can momentarily quench the thirst, but it cannot truly satisfy, nor can it prevent thirst in the future. Everyone who drinks it will be thirsty again.

How often aren’t we like the Samaritan woman? Like the Samaritan woman, when God offers us a great gift, we totally misunderstand it. We wonder how God is going to give us a great gift. We wonder if it is even possible. And we think that, whatever God has in store for us in the future that we can’t see, it can’t be as good as the stuff we have right here and now which we can see.

But the stuff we have here, as good as it is, has its limitations. The money we work so hard to earn, save, and spend; the technology which we crave to make our lives easier; all of the possessions; all of the fame; all of the things we have here cannot truly satisfy us. They provide for our needs and give us happiness, but we will always be thirsty for more – more money, better technology, additional possessions, and so on. In addition, as we get older and closer to death, we will be absolutely parched because these things may postpone death, but they can never prevent death.

Jesus offers something better. He offers living water that, when people drink it, they will never be thirsty again. In other words, Jesus is talking about eternal life. He is not talking about life on the clouds with a harp and wings as heaven is so often portrayed. That would be too trivial. Jesus is not talking about an extended form of this life now. Can you imagine an eternity of the existence which we have now with all of the violence, all of the pain, and all of the suffering of this life? That would be more like hell than heaven.

Jesus is talking about an existence in which we will never be thirsty again. By that, he means a life in which no need is ever left unmet and no desire is ever left unfulfilled. It is life with no pain, no suffering, no sorrow, no disappointment. It is life with perfect peace and unending joy. It is the Garden of Eden all over again.

The woman in the well just doesn't get it. She underestimates the gift of God. She sees Jesus' offer in a very literal way. She thinks Jesus is going to improve her life here and now. She expects living water from Jesus so that she never is physically thirsty again and doesn't have work to draw water from the well again. That would be great, but Jesus intends to give her more.

We do the same. We think God is all about making our existence here better and our life so much easier. We expect God to bless us financially, heal our diseases, give us the material goods we want and crave, and take away all of our problems. Popular mega-church pastor, Joel Osteen, says exactly this in his book, *Your Best Life Now*. All of those things would be good, but Jesus intends to give us more.

What keeps this woman from receiving this gift is her sin. Repentance is necessary. Jesus is masterful in bringing this woman to repentance. Although He knows her sin, He doesn't have to attack her or preach a "hell fire and brimstone" sermon against her. He quietly says, "Go, call your husband and come here." The woman tries to dodge the issue by simply saying, "I have no husband." She is right – as far as it goes. Then Jesus says in a very calm way, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your

husband. What you have said is true.” Jesus’ statement is profoundly devastating. He exposes her sinfulness without having to vent or rant. She is utterly guilty and knows it.

God doesn’t have to send “hell fire and brimstone” to convict us, either. When we truly hear His Law and honestly evaluate our lives, we see our sinfulness and unworthiness as the woman did. His Law destroys our self-righteousness, no matter how much we try to dodge the issue. It is devastating in condemning the wrong and sinful things which we not only do, but also say and think. It is devastating in condemning us for the good and right things which we have not only failed to do, but have failed to say and think.

The woman, despite the fact that she knows her guilt, tries to change the subject. She wants to deflect His condemnation by debating Jesus about religious differences between the Jews and Samaritans.

We do the same. When confronted by our sin, we want to quickly change the subject. We want to deflect our guilt by debating religious differences and Biblical interpretations.

The woman’s final attempt to deflect her guilt is actually the way by which she is saved. She essentially gives up trying to debate Jesus and casually says, “The Messiah is coming. He’ll figure it all out and tell us.” Jesus replies, “I who speak to you am he. I am the Messiah.”

Jesus, the Messiah, came into the world, as John said in the previous chapter, “not to condemn the world, but to save the world.” He took all sin, all guilt, all hell, and all death upon Himself to the cross. Through His suffering and death, He defeated suffering and death through the sacrifice of His life to gain the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. That action was ratified and guaranteed by His resurrection from the dead three days later.

Now, that forgiveness and that life is offered to us. As water is received through drinking, so the gift of living water of everlasting life is received through faith. Even that faith is a gift given to us through water – the water of Holy Baptism. Through the water of Holy Baptism, each of us has drunk deeply from the spring of water which wells up to everlasting life.

Now that we have that living water, we need never thirst again, beginning right now. We can look at the necessities of life as simply that – necessities for life on this planet. But they are not are focal point. We can look at the luxuries of life as gifts of God to make life here more enjoyable. But we don't need them. Our thirst has been satisfied, not in the things of this life, but in the life that is to come – eternal life with God in heaven.

When we think we are getting thirsty again, we do as Jesus told the woman: worship God in spirit and truth. When we worship Him in spirit with “the righteousness of faith in the heart and the fruits of faith” (as our Lutheran Confessions say) and in the truth of His revelation to us in His Word and His Holy Sacraments, our thirst is quenched.

People often think that Church is a necessary obligation or an unpleasant duty. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Church is a dispenser of living water for people who live every day in the hot desert of this sinful world. Through the comfort and encouragement of His Word as it is read, preached, and taught and through the gifts of His Sacraments of Holy Baptism, Absolution, and the Holy Supper, we are continually refreshed and renewed so that we might face, with vim and vigor, the challenges, the fears, the frustrations, and the difficulties of life.

Jesus says to each of us – indeed, to every living person, “To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.” (Rev. 21:6) And as we face death, He also says, “The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let the one who hears say, “Come!” Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.” (Rev. 22:17) The living water is here in abundance. Drink deeply and often from it. Have your thirst eternally satisfied. And live forever. Amen.