

## LIVING WATER

*A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "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 said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." (John 4:7-15, NRSV)*

Up until a few years ago I had only seen Texas in the middle of the summer. I can describe the color in one word: brown. And I can describe the reason in two words: no rain. Every year when we trekked to the Lone Star state to visit Colleen's family during the dog days of August it was hot, dry, and brown from lack of rain. That was my image of Texas. Then one year we flew down for my brother-in-law's April wedding and I had quite a shock. Texas was green. Bluebonnets and Indian Paintbrushes bloomed in colorful abundance. What a difference the spring rains made—grass and trees that normally looked half dead now thrived.

I wonder if the Samaritan woman from today's scripture lesson, the one who met Jesus at the well, felt like Texas in the summer: half dead, beaten down, and spiritually parched? Jesus himself was likely feeling physically parched in the midday heat as he watched the woman approach. But instead of grabbing a drink and heading for some shade, he took the time to talk to a stranger. Certainly, he caught the woman off guard when he asked for a drink for she responds, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" For any number of reasons, it was an inappropriate and unusual request and she knew it. He was a Jew and she was a Samaritan—two groups divided by suspicion, hate and intolerance. Besides the religious and ethnic divide, gender norms of the day prohibited the conversation as well. No upstanding Jewish man, let alone a rabbi, would strike up a conversation with an unknown woman. In fact, an ancient rabbinical saying of the time warned men: "He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the law and at the last will inherit [hell]" (*The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, p. 565*). And so it was, that in merely speaking to the woman, Jesus sought to bridge gaps. Obviously Jesus was more concerned about justice and fairness than he was about social custom or convention.

No doubt this same Jesus who turned water into wine just a few chapters earlier could have easily produced all the Poland Spring he ever needed. But his purpose in dealing with the woman went far beyond mere H<sub>2</sub>O. It dealt with the very essence of life itself. After she fails to offer a drink he responds, “If only you knew what God gives, and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water” (*The Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible, Vol. 10, p. 57*). As in the conversation with Nicodemus that we discussed last week, Jesus attempts to take the conversation with the woman from a material level to a deeper spiritual level. And like last week’s story, the woman misses Jesus’ point and calls his bluff on the water saying, “Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep, so where can you get ‘living water?’” Jesus then deals on both levels at once and replies, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never again be thirsty. The water that I shall give will be a spring of water within [them], welling up and bringing eternal life” (Ibid.).

What is this “living water” that Jesus referred to, and how do we drink it even today? The living water may refer to the teachings and new revelation of Jesus. The insights on God and life that Jesus taught come to our dusty souls as streams in the desert. In fact, in the Old Testament, water symbolizes God’s wisdom that leads us to life (*The Anchor Bible: The Gospel of John I-XII, p.178*). We find examples of this in the Book of Proverbs. One proverb says, “The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, so that one may avoid the snares of death” (13:14, NRSV). Another says, “The words of the mouth are deep waters; the fountain of wisdom is a gushing stream” (18:4, NRSV).

In what ways do the teachings of Jesus provide life-giving waters for us? In a culture that says get all you can, we hear Jesus saying, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” In these days of one frightening event after another, we hear Jesus saying, “Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. You believe in God, believe also in me.” In a world torn apart by violence and war, we hear Jesus saying, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.” Whatever our lot in life and wherever we find ourselves on a particular day, we can look in the pages of scripture, especially the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, to find the wisdom and sustenance we need. The encouragement of God’s own Son can water our arid souls and irrigate our dry spirits.

The living water of which Jesus spoke may also refer to the Spirit of God. Recall in last week’s story of Nicodemus that Jesus compared the Spirit of God to the wind. In today’s story, water may symbolize God’s Spirit as well. Jesus tells the woman that the living water will become a spring of water welling up or leaping up to eternal life. In the Old Testament the same word for leaping up is used when the Spirit of God comes upon Samson, Saul, and David (Ibid. p. 171). In ancient Jewish writings at the time of Jesus, we find the words, “Like purifying waters [God] will sprinkle upon him the Spirit of truth” (Ibid. p. 179). Even today God’s Spirit can cleanse, soothe, and heal those places in our lives that have festered for too long—the estranged relationship, the painful memory, the anger we’ve kept bottled up inside. When we drink deeply and daily of God’s Spirit we find that this life-giving water will yield the fruit of “love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23, RSV). As the gentle rains of the Spirit cultivate the most scorched corners of our inner selves, we too can experience all of the comfort, wisdom, and virtue associated with an ever-deepening spiritual life.

A few minutes from now, during the Communion portion of our service this morning, we will have the opportunity to slow down, to become quiet, to take a few moments to consider our own spiritual journeys. This morning as we share Communion let’s reflect on where we find ourselves this hour. Where have we been, and where are we heading, both as individuals and as a family of faith? Have we taken the time lately to be challenged and refreshed by the words of Jesus? Have we paused and prayed for the Spirit of God to fill us anew? This morning we have that opportunity as we eat the bread and share the cup. We have this opportunity because as we share this meal together, the bonds that unite us to one another and to God may be strengthened, thus bridging the gaps as Jesus did with the woman at the well.

This morning Communion can be so much more to us than a ritual we perform five times a year. When we read the conversation with the woman at the well, we know it’s not about the water. And when we think about Communion, we know it’s not about bread and wine. It’s about a relationship with the living God. It’s about ultimately and intimately connecting ourselves to Christ. It’s about remembering the night Jesus was betrayed and the death he experienced on the cross. And it’s about finding sustenance in the glory of his Easter resurrection. May the bread and wine become for us today a spring of hope, an oasis of comfort, and a bridge to living water. AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only  
Edited by Colleen Brown Only  
The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)  
March 3, 2002

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, the wind of your mysterious Spirit blows through our lives offering us the hope of transformation, offering us the possibility of renewal. Help us open our hearts to you. Deep inside we may have anger that needs addressing, anxiety that needs calming, grudges that need forgiving, grief that needs comforting, confusion that needs clarity, wounds that need healing. You know us better than we know ourselves. You have promised that you will never forsake us—help us never to forsake you. Help us to take a step back and regain our perspective by viewing life from your perspective.

We thank you this day for the presence of your life-giving Spirit in our lives. May we sense the Spirit’s movement in our lives more and more as we travel our Lenten journey. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. AMEN.

