

First Presbyterian Church
John 4:5-42, “Will You Give Me A Drink?”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/12/2023

Our theme this Lent is “Seeking: honest questions for deeper faith.”

In today’s passage, Jesus is the seeker. He asks, “Will you give me a drink?”

Jesus gave more than anyone.

But he also recognized his own needs and weakness,
and he accepted help from others.

In fact, his acceptance of help was at times an essential element of his ministry.

Our congregation does many things to help people in need.

We give out food, clothing, resources for all kinds of circumstances,
and contribute thousands of dollars
to amazing local and international missions.

This commitment to giving and selfless love is one of the things
that I love the most about our congregation.

Today I want us to look at the other side of giving,
which is asking for (and receiving) help from others.

When we cross social, physical, political, or spiritual boundaries
and reveal our own weakness to another person (or group of people),
God can use them to create transformative encounters.

In this passage, Jesus is heading north toward his home territory of Galilee,
but on the way passes through Samaria.

Samaritans were historically related to Jews in their ancestry and worship,
but had developed a deep rift over time that left them opposed to each other.

Within this town in Samaria is a famous well attributed to the great patriarch,
Jacob – father of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Jesus' humanity is on full display in this scene
– it's noon, the heat of the sun is bearing down,
and Jesus is exhausted from the day's travel.
He sits down *on* the well, which (according to scholar Kenneth Bailey)
has a large 5 foot wide capstone that is 18 to 20 inches thick
to prevent dirt (or children) from falling in.

He's thirsty. He's worn out. And ... he doesn't have anything
to get water out of the well with.
The disciples go into town to get food,
so he's sitting there alone in Samaria as a Jewish outsider.

Just then a Samaritan woman comes out to the well to get some water.
When she draws near, Jesus says to her, "Will you give me a drink?"

Through his amazing book, "Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes"
Kenneth Bailey has helped me understand
just what an appallingly inappropriate thing that was to say.

For one thing, Jesus, as a man,
had no business speaking to a woman he does not know.
Bailey reports that "Throughout forty years of life in the Middle East
I never crossed this social boundary line.
In village society a strange man does not even make
eye contact with a woman in a public place."

On top of that, Jesus, as a Jew, had no business receiving a drink from a Samaritan
because it would have been considered religiously unclean.

Bailey explains:
**"Jesus ignored the five-hundred-year-old hostility that had developed
between Jews and Samaritans. Three hundred years earlier the Greeks
had used Samaria as a base for their control of Jewish territory. The
Jews found occasion to retaliate (128 BC) by destroying the Samaritan
temple on the summit of Mt. Gerizim. The Samaritans responded by
penetrating the temple area of Jerusalem a few years before the birth of
Jesus and scattering the bones of the dead across the area on the eve**

of Passover in order to defile the complex and make it impossible for the Jews to keep the feast. Jesus set aside all the bitterness of past history as he requested a drink from this Samaritan woman.”

The uncomfortable awkwardness of this encounter plays out in many ways throughout their dialogue.

When Jesus asks her for a drink, the woman points out that this is obviously not something a Samaritan woman should do for a Jewish man.

Despite his physical thirst, Jesus then suggests that if she knew who he was, she'd be asking *him* for a drink of fresh spring water.

But the woman's no fool, she can see he's got no bucket.

So in v. 12 she pokes at the cultural divide between them:

“Are you greater than *our* father Jacob who gave *us* (and not you Jews, she implies) this well?”

Then Jesus opens up a little more to her:

the water he's offering will become a spring welling up to eternal life!

This is the free gift of the Holy Spirit.

She says she wants this magic water, so she won't have to come out to the well.

This is probably a reference to her personal shame.

She comes to the well at noon because

that's when nobody else will be there.

Reputable village women go to the wells in the cool parts of the day

and they go as a group. She is there alone in the heat,

a sign that she is something of an outcast.

So Jesus tells her to call her husband. This is another unreasonable cultural request.

A Samaritan woman in that day would not go to her husband

and tell him to come out to the well to meet a strange Jewish man

she was talking to by herself.

She deflects, “I have no husband.”

Jesus goes deeper: “You’re right, he says.

In fact you’ve had five and you’re not married to the one you’re with now.”

Is Jesus being cruel? No. He’s showing her the way to the living water.

We cannot come to God hiding our pain, hiding our weakness,
hiding our shame. We come in full openness and trust that—
because of Jesus—God loves us in spite of all those things.
She must trust Jesus with who she really is.

But in v. 20 she deflects again with theology:

“We worship on Mt. Gerizim but you people worship on Mt. Zion.”

Now Jesus reaches beyond the divides and gives her an incredible insight
about worshipping God that not even his disciples have received:

As a result of Jesus’ ministry,
worshippers will not be centered on a place
but on the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In v. 25 She says, basically, “I don’t know who you are,
but this is the kind of stuff the Messiah is supposed to explain
when he comes to save us.”

And in the next verse this whole episode reaches its pinnacle:

Jesus declares, “I, the one speaking to you, I AM.”

This statement, “I AM” comes in exactly the same form
as the statement God makes through the burning bush to Moses
when asked what to call this divine presence.

The Lord says, “Call me ‘I am.’”

When Jesus says, “I am” in John 4:26 it is the first of many “I AM”
statements which Jesus makes in John’s gospel.

In the verses that follow, Jesus’ disciples are dumbfounded
at his ludicrous behavior with this woman. They just want him
to eat something so he can return to his right mind!

But the woman knows more than these disciples do,
and she runs to her village testifying to them and wondering aloud,
“Could this be the Messiah?” He stays there for a couple more days
and many Samaritans come to faith because of *her* testimony.

The 4th Century Eastern Father, Ephrem the Syrian wrote that
“At the beginning of the conversation Jesus did not make himself known
to her, but first she caught sight of a thirsty man, then a Jew,
then a Rabbi, afterwards a prophet, last of all the Messiah.
She tried to get the better of the thirsty man, she showed dislike of the Jew,
she heckled the Rabbi, she was swept off her feet by the prophet,
and she adored the Christ.”

But let us not forget how all of this happened:
Jesus crossed the boundaries, revealed his weakness,
and enabled a mutual exchange with someone
who he was not supposed to encounter.

Our congregation is amazing at giving to others, and praise God for that!
Can we, in addition to being charitable,
also follow Jesus in being *vulnerable*?

One place we have begun to do this is by asking for volunteers
at Wed. Breakfast from among the people who arrive for food.
Each week one or two people who come in from the cold
and rest a bit while drinking coffee and having some breakfast
are invited to help us in our place of need:

Can they stay after and wipe tables or vacuum?
This invitation honors them as people and it crosses a boundary.
In our social world, homeless people are not supposed
to be the ones who clean things.

But at Wed. Breakfast that is being challenged, and it's beautiful to see.

What other weaknesses and vulnerabilities do we have?
A recent session review suggested that aging members, lack of diversity,
and volunteer fatigue were among our weaknesses.

Aging members: What would happen if we sat down with someone from a different generation and asked honest questions?
What do they find meaningful / engaging?

Lack of diversity: Do you have a neighbor who has a different racial / ethnic background from you? Do you know their name?
What would happen if you reached out – not to make them a project but just to learn from who they are as a friend?

Volunteer fatigue: If you are feeling worn out, ask for a break!
Take a sabbatical from your usual church volunteering and listen to conversations being held in other communities instead.
(Or, if you don't usually volunteer, sign up and see what you think!)

If we are creative and willing to cross some social boundaries,
we can use many of our weak-points as opportunities to connect with others
and then look for the leading of the Holy Spirit just like Jesus did.

The truth is that in many ways we are not adequate for this moment
in the life of the church.

We don't know all we need to know to effectively minister
to the wider community.

We don't know how to be the church in a way that works for relational hopes
and the rhythms of life for younger people.

But the humility of Jesus shows us a different approach
that is perfect for people who are themselves in need.

I'll close with this beautiful quote from Sri Lankan theologian Daniel Niles:

“The only way to build love between two people or two groups of people
is to be so related to each other as to stand in need of each other.

The Christian community must serve.

It must also be in a position where it needs to be served.

... The glory of the Lion is the glory of the Lamb.”