

Looking for the Water from a Deeper Well

Based on John 4: 5-30

March 15, 2020

You don't need me to tell you that these are strange times. When it's not snowing outside but there's a debate about whether to have church, something is drastically wrong. I probably haven't washed my hands so often for so long in the last two *years* as I have in the last two weeks. We are worried--about ourselves, about each other, and we're wondering how worried we should be. Some of us are worried about how worried we are. Are we panicking unnecessarily? We're uncertain what the next few weeks will bring, given the ratcheting up of anxiety that this past week has brought. And we're uncertain if we got enough toilet paper off the Acme shelves before it was gone.

I have to say I'm not sure how toilet paper is the thing that's going to save us. I guess people feel like they *can* buy a lot of it, since it's nonperishable, so they should? And once the rush for it begins, it becomes a vicious cycle—everyone wants to stock up, in case there's going to be none left from everyone else who wants to stock up.

That should be a lesson to us all about how anxiety feeds on itself, how we help produce the panic that affects us. This is what FDR was talking about when he said, “the only thing to fear is fear itself.” Lots of people in lots of contexts are quoting that lately. But fear of the virus—of catching it and in particular of passing it on to more vulnerable people—that's a legitimate fear. Fear that other people will buy up all the toilet paper before I get my share, on the other hand, *that's* the kind of fear that FDR was talking about. The fear that creates more fear. The fear that moves us away from loving our neighbors.

Speaking of handwashing, at least there is not nor is there likely to be a shortage of water. Though people were stocking up on that too, buying up gallons of bottled water, which mystifies me completely. My best guess is that we're going into “snow in the forecast” mode. If we might have to stay at home for weeks on end, our memory tells us, then our pipes might be freezing and we should have jugs of water on hand. Though it's also possible that we just associate water so strongly with life, that somehow

stockpiling gallon jugs of water boosts our confidence that we can live through this.

Water is one of the most profound symbols of our faith—from the biblical story of creation, when the spirit of God hovered over the waters and water was the nothing from which God created, to the sacrament of baptism, an echo of Jesus' death and resurrection. We are born, the gospel of John tells us, of water and the spirit.

In our world, as we are now realizing in a new and urgent way, we all drink from the same well. The virus is a painful way for us to see it, but see it we must—the world is really very small. The habits of French tourists affect the nation of Ghana. The health practices of Brazilian leadership make news in the United States. On the other hand, South Korea came up with the idea of drive-through testing for the virus, worked out some of the bugs, and we benefit from their experience. Italian, Iranian, Korean, American, we drink from the same well. We share the water God created.

In this morning's scripture, it's not clear the water can be shared. Although Jesus and the Samaritan woman sit at a well and *talk* about water, no water is drawn and no one drinks. As the woman points out, there is not even any bucket. They share the well, they even share the water in some sense, but they do not drink it.

The well Jesus comes upon in Samaria is Jacob's well, we are told. Jacob perhaps met his beloved Rachael at this well when he was a traveller and Rachael watered his camels and sheep and him. It's a common story in the Bible, and the well, the source of water and life, represents all kinds of things--life, women in their connection to childbirth, fertility, and the ongoing pleasures that generate life. In Jacob's story, the traveler and the native come together in a simple act of sharing, enabling each other to drink in plenty from the well.

But in John's gospel, neither the traveler, Jesus, nor the native woman drink from the well, no one's sheep or camels drink, and no one falls in love. The water is between Jesus and the woman like a boundary, apparently uncrossable. When Jesus asks for a drink, the woman finds

the request somehow shocking. You don't want water from me, she says, in effect—you as a Jew do not want anything from my (Samaritan) hand.

In this story, both the woman and the disciples expect Jesus to show some prejudice. As a Jew, he is expected to look down on Samaritans, who are understood to be unclean and idolatrous. And as a man, he's expected to look down on women, in particular on strange women out in public alone in the noon day sun. When the disciples return, they are not surprised to find Jesus talking with a Samaritan, but they are shocked to find him talking with a woman.

Notice, incidentally, they don't say, why is he talking to *that kind* of woman. Interpretation of this story often makes this woman out to be somewhat worse than she is. True, she's been married five times. For all we know she's been widowed five times. Things happened in the ancient world—life expectancy was short! And she's with some man now who is not her husband. Well, if you'd been married five times, you'd be a little gun shy too. Can you blame her? Maybe some could blame her, maybe we could blame her, but Jesus does not blame her. He knows; that's all. He seems to say to her, *you don't have to hide all that from me. I get it. I know who you are and I know you're worth talking to.*

Unlike most people who talk with Jesus in the gospels, this woman does not need to be healed or cleansed, she does not have a demonized or dying child. She has had a rough life of one kind or another, but she has not come to Jesus asking for help. Jesus rather asks her, for water, and offers something more. He offers her what she doesn't know she's been looking for--the water, as Emmylou Harris once sang, from a deeper well.¹

The Samaritan woman hasn't been looking, as far as she knows. She has simply been putting one foot in front of the other, coming to the well, getting water enough to survive, carrying it back. Getting a man

¹ David Olney wrote this song, which Emmylou Harris powerfully recorded, "Deeper Well." Listen to it on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8fOzb0m41c>

who will maybe take care of her for today; getting out and finding another man when yesterday's man gave out. She doesn't want anything spiritual, as far as she knows. She just wants something a little more lasting, something that doesn't require constant daily effort. "Give *me* that water," she says, "so I won't have to keep coming here every day." She has a kind of existential weariness about her, and what she asks of Jesus is a kind of rest.

But the Samaritan woman also doesn't believe that Jesus and she can share the water. She doesn't believe that he has what it takes to cross the barrier between them. Specifically, she doesn't think that Jesus has a bucket. "You have no bucket," she says, very practically, "and the well is deep." What makes you think you can get all the way down there to haul up water for you and me both? Do you have any idea, the woman seems to be saying, how much work that would entail?

It's no small thing, this crossing of boundaries, this sharing of water between groups like the Jews and Samaritans who had been hostile for centuries. It doesn't happen just because you want it to. And it's not without its perils.

There's that great scene in the movie *Hidden Figures*, when Katherine Gobles, the real number genius in the huge room full of NASA mathematicians, goes casually for a cup of coffee, pouring the cup absent-mindedly while she reads more equations. Only as she picks up the cup does she realize the whole room is watching her drink from their common coffee pot, with hostility, because she alone among them is African American, and this is Virginia, 1960 or so. The next day there is a smaller pot on the table, labelled "colored." Of course, there is no coffee in that pot, which is not even plugged in.

Our history of segregation teaches us, what we must never forget, that when we refuse to eat and drink and learn and be together, we are not simply separating others from ourselves; we are depriving others of what we have, and depriving ourselves as well.

There's water in the well, enough for all concerned, but the Samaritan woman is right that the well is very deep. There's enough land and water in this world for all God's children to drink freely, safely, to learn and to grow, to trade and farm in peace. The perception, the claim that there is not enough, that therefore some must go without—that claim is in itself a sin. It is a statement of unfaith in God as provider.

It's difficult to talk about the centrality of sharing resources across boundaries, in the middle of the current crisis. Social distancing is, it seems, about not sitting down with the woman at the well. Not sharing—not sharing space, not sharing air and certainly not sharing a single loaf or cup, not sharing is the order of the day. But it's important that we understand that as Christians our not sharing needs to be motivated by concern for our neighbor. It needs to be upheld by a belief in one, compassionate, creator God. It cannot devolve into a hoarding of resources, a race for the liferafts. This is not the Titanic, where there were insufficient liferafts. This is the United States, and there is enough clean water for everyone; there is enough healthcare and safe shelter. This is God's world and there is enough for all of us.

Even as the Samaritan woman disbelieves in the possibility of sharing, the sharing begins. The conversation that wasn't supposed to happen, happens. Jesus promises her what she has been wanting, what she has been looking for without even knowing it. He promises her something beyond the water of survival, the water from a well even deeper than Jacob's. The living water Jesus talks about can be shared even by a strange man and a weary woman, even by people who can't seem to share anything else. The water Jesus promises will become "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." Water gushing up from a very deep place, that doesn't need a pulley, a rope, or a bucket. It comes to us, accepts and knows us, across all boundaries and classifications, gives us life, together. Amen.