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Satisfying Our Thirsty Souls

John 4:1-15

CAPITOL BIBLE STUDY **201st General Assembly**

- **TUESDAY (SESSION) @ 8:00 AM**
IN ROOM 203, RYAN BLDG.
- **WEDNESDAY (SESSION) @ 1:00 PM**
IN LIBRARY, RYAN BLDG.

Capitol Commission Bible studies are held on Tuesday and Wednesday. The legislator Bible study meets from 8:00-8:45 AM in Room 203, Ryan Bldg. (during session weeks). An open-to-all Bible study meets from 1:00-1:30 PM in the Library, Ryan Bldg. (during session weeks). The Bible studies are nonpartisan and non-denominational, and will focus on the Gospel of John for the 2017 General Assembly.

– Jeff Whitebread, Pennsylvania State Minister, Capitol Commission

John 4:1-15: “Satisfying Our Thirsty Souls”

I recently became aware of a ministry called the Samaritans.

Today, the Samaritans have become world-famous as an organization for helping people in extreme distress. They listen, on the telephone or in person, to horrible things that have happened to their fellow human beings, and try to talk calmly through the problems and help the sufferer accept the way things are and see a way forward. Many thousands of people have been restrained from suicide, or other extreme acts, through this usually unseen ministry.

The organization, ironically, is named after the people whom the first century Jews regarded as the worst kind of outcasts. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus tells the story about a Samaritan who had gone to the aid of a Jew in desperate need when his own people had ignored him (Luke 10:30-37). This is where the name comes from. But here in John’s gospel, too, the Samaritans are also important, and this is the passage that makes them so.

What’s Wrong with This Picture?

(John 4:4) - Samaria, the territory the woman is from, is the name given to the land between Galilee to the north and Judea to the South. For those who were traveling between the two territories, the route through Samaria was the most direct means according to geography. At times, however, the Samaritans would attack pilgrims going from Galilee to Jerusalem. Many would travel a different route, a longer way, down the Jordan valley to Jericho and then up the hill from there to Jerusalem. Jesus would take this route later, during his last journey to Jerusalem; but, at this time, they went through Samaria.

And there at noon, during the hottest point of the day, Jesus found himself alone by Jacob’s well when he encounters a Samaritan woman from the town of Sychar.

Now, as this encounter unfolds there will be several things that are out of place, and they all matter. They may not look odd to us, but the key to understanding the passage is to consider how it would have looked to anyone at the time it was written.

(John 4:9) - For starters, Jesus was already known as a holy man, leading a movement to bring Israel back to God. In this culture, many devout Jewish men would not have allowed themselves to be alone with a woman. If it was unavoidable, they certainly would not have entered into a conversation with her. Later in the chapter John highlights this point by showing how startled the disciples were by this (John 4:27).

Second, the woman is a Samaritan. Ever since some Jewish exiles came back from Babylon to find the central section of their territory occupied by a group that claimed to be the true descendants of Abraham and opposed their return, there had been constant conflict between them. Sometimes it had broken out into actual skirmishes, with bloodshed and murder. But mostly it was simply a matter of not mixing. The Jews would have nothing to do with the Samaritans, especially, not sharing eating and drinking vessels with them. And yet Jesus asks this woman for a drink.

Finally, added to all of this, the woman Jesus engages in conversation is obviously a bad character. The normal time for women to visit the well, which was some distance from the town, would have been during a cooler time of the day, generally first thing in the morning. This woman has come at a time when she is least likely to encounter anyone who knows her, and her past immoral lifestyle. The last thing she would want to do is rub shoulders with the women of the town, and likely, they felt the same way about her. And yet Jesus, who knows all about her life, seeks to help the woman consider her deeper internal needs, as he interacts with her in the midst of her daily chore of drawing water.

Are You Willing?

(John 4:11) - Jesus’ question, “Will you give me a drink?” seeks to gauge the receptivity of the woman he meets. And by her response, one quickly understands various barriers will be encountered during his interaction with her. But we can never forget, he is the bridge, the connection point or ladder – as mentioned in his conversation with Nathaniel - joining both heaven and earth. His work is precisely to bring the life of heaven to earth, and make available the activity of God into the ordinary, sometimes mundane, circumstances of our lives that become weary and deadened. This was certainly the experience of the woman who was drawing water.

Satisfying Our Thirsty Souls (cont'd) - John 4:1-15

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Reflection:

The way that Jesus seeks to pull the life of heaven into our life is by invitation. We come to know the God whom Jesus knows here, he is one who does not bully, manipulate, or coerce us to seek him; but very simply, he asks. With the woman it was, “Will you give me a drink?” by which he seeks deeper access into her life. Even now, Jesus continues to ask a similar question to us, “Are you willing?” Are we willing to respond to the request of Jesus - whatever it might be? His request is tailored to our context, culture, and environment - but make no mistake, he is still asking for access into our lives. And our response, like that of the woman, speaks volumes as to the condition of our heart.

Previously we had considered various cultural and historic reasons why this encounter with the woman was odd and out of place, and yet, Jesus steps beyond them all in an effort to address her greatest need. He will do the same for us. Allowing Jesus access is without question disruptive to our lives, and we have the power to thwart his advances. But don't our hearts long for something more, and isn't this longing exactly what peaked the woman's interest? Where in your life, at this moment, are you sensing a disconnection from God? What situation has become a deadening experience for you? Might not Jesus be asking for deeper access into your life? Isn't he trying, at this moment, to pull the life of God into the dissatisfaction of your own human experience?

You Will Never Thirst Again

This is often the kind of conversation that John records for us. Jesus is talking to people who misunderstand what he is saying. As John mentioned in the previous chapter, Jesus testifies to what he has seen and heard in heaven, for he speaks the words of God; but it is hard for people to receive his message. As one who watched the unfolding drama of human history, Jesus is acutely aware of what is wrong with the human heart and our relational interactions with one another. He is speaking to our true need, a heavenly one; but often, those he interacts with only have ears that hear at an earthly level, and the misunderstandings, are in a sense, 'natural.' Jesus, asking for a drink, tells her she should be the one asking him for one.

(John 4:10) - The clue is found in the phrase 'living water.' That is the regular phrase that people used in Jesus time for running water – water in a stream or river, rather than a pool or well, water that is likely to be fresh and clean; rather than water that was standing around getting stagnant. But Jesus isn't referring to physical water, whether it is still or moving. He is referring to the new life that is found in hearing and receiving – might we say drinking his words into our life. This offer is to anyone at all, no matter their gender, their geography, their racial or moral background.

In talking about 'living water' Jesus is referencing something quite different, something for which all the water on the earth is only a signpost, a pointer to a deeper reality. It is a water that quenches your thirst in

such a way that you will never thirst again, but it also becomes a spring of water that will bubble up to touch every area of our life and refresh you with the new life which is coming into the world through Jesus. And then, it spills out of our lives to touch those who are near us.

(John 4:15) - This is enough for the woman. She doesn't know exactly what he's talking about, but she wants to know more. And now the door of her heart has been opened – maybe only a slight crack, but that is enough for Jesus. And as mentioned earlier, she is in for a shock – as is everyone who takes Jesus seriously. He has living water to offer all right, but when you start to drink it every area of your life will change.

Reflection:

What strikes me is the woman's statement, “give me some of this water so that I won't need to keep *coming here*...”. This statement is pregnant with meaning and reveals the heart of the woman. Why doesn't she want to get thirsty? It's so she won't have to keep *coming here*. Based on the circumstances of her life, what made it difficult for her to “have to keep *coming here*?” Isn't it the following...the daily reminder of her circumstances and shame...the judgment she faced from others...feeling the need to come during the heat of the day...disconnection from relationships and the community life at the well...her anger and bitterness turned toward those who didn't “understand the challenges of her plight...and finally, how she died, inside, a little bit more every time she had to *come here* to draw water.

Jesus says these words later in John's gospel, “whoever believes in me as the Scripture said, rivers of living water will flow from within them. By this he meant the Spirit” – this is the new life, a life of interaction with God. We believe something when we act as if it were true. We believe Jesus when we act as if what he says will refresh us, when we fill our cup with his understanding of the world and drink down his truth by acting as if he knows what he is talking about. John opens his gospel by saying, yet to all who receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right *'to become'* children of God. The woman's issue with going to the well and her desire not to thirst any more was an internal – a spiritual issue. Into this reality Jesus is truly giving her water that quenches her spiritual fatigue. It has power to breathe new life into a deadened activity brought on by her disconnection from God.

Book referenced:

Wright, NT. John for Everyone. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2004

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PM, Library - Ryan Office Building