

Living Water

John 4:1-42

One of the commencement traditions at Harvard University is Senior Class Chapel. On the morning of graduation, seniors gather in Memorial Church to hear the Dean of the Chapel offer words of solace and encouragement as they leave “the Yard” to take their places in the world.

The 1998 senior class heard this from Chaplain Peter Gomes: “You are going to be sent out of here for good, and most of you aren’t ready to go. The president is about to bid you into the fellowship of educated men and women and,” - and here he paused and spoke each word slowly for emphasis - “you know just - how - dumb - you - really - are.”

“And worse than that,” Doctor Gomes continued, “the world - and your parents in particular - are going to expect that you will be among the brightest and best. But you know that you can no longer fool all the people even some of the time. By noontime today, you will be out of here. By tomorrow you will be history. By Saturday, you will be toast. That’s a fact - no exceptions, no extensions.”

“Nevertheless, there is reason to hope,” Doctor Gomes promised. “The future is God’s gift to you. God will not let you stumble or fall. God has not brought you this far to this place to abandon you or leave you here alone and afraid. The God of Israel never stumbles, never sleeps, never goes on sabbatical. Thus, my beloved and bewildered young friends, do not be afraid.”

What Doctor Gomes did for the 1998 senior class at Harvard, Jesus does for the woman at the well.

Today if you were a tourist in Israel, you can journey to Samaria and the town of Sychar. Sychar is a place that the passage of time seems to have forgotten. Only around 300 people live there, many of whom still consider themselves Samaritans.

The primary structure in Sychar is a kind of cellar which houses a well. It’s the only source of water for miles. Archeologists estimate its date 4,000 years old and it’s the exact location where the Samaritan woman encounter the Christ. Samaritans, Muslims, Christians, Jews all agree that this is the place where the story took place.

It was noonday at Sychar. The disciples went into the village to buy food. Jesus stopped at the well on the outskirts for a brief respite from the sun’s blistering rays. When a woman of the village walked up Jesus addressed her: “Woman, give me a drink.”

She’s somewhat surprised that Jesus spoke to her. Surprised for two reasons. First, men did not publicly speak to women. Second, she was a Samaritan and Jews did not dealing with Samaritans. They considered them unclean and were thought of as dogs. By speaking to her Jesus crossed both gender and racial lines.

She replied: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of water from me, a woman of Samaria?” Jesus ignores her question - ignores the racial issue - and gets to the heart of the matter. He said: “If you had known who was asking you for water you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

Jesus is speaking theologically but she can’t get beyond thinking literally. “Oh, go on,” she snips. “This is a deep well and you haven’t even got a bucket.

The woman appears to be poking fun at Jesus: “You have nothing to draw with and this well is deep. Just how do you suppose to draw this living water of yours? Our father Jacob drank from this well. Do you think that you are better than he is?”

I love the irony in her sarcasm. Here she is speaking to the Master of Life about the depth of the well, when her own life was so miserably shallow.

In a sudden change of direction, Jesus startles her and asks her to get her husband. With this one question he exposes her dark side. Something we all have. By any ethical standard this woman was living an immoral life. Of course, we already have a hint of that because she has come to the well by herself at noon. The village women come to the well together in the coolness of the morning. She doesn't come with them because she's not welcome.

The woman replies: "I have no husband." Now listen. She's honest. She doesn't try to hide her immoral behavior. **She owns up to it and that's the first step in finding living water for a thirsty soul.** We must give an honest confession about our lives.

Jesus replies: "What you say is true. You don't have a husband. You have five husbands. And the man that you're living with now is not your husband." Note that Jesus does not shake his finger in her face. He does not give her a lecture on what an evil person she is. Rather, he brags on her for telling the truth.

I wish that we could get this message across in the church. The purpose of religion is not to dwell on the bad in people, but to enhance the good. It's to elevate people, not pull them down. I'm afraid we haven't always done a good job of that in the church.

So, Jesus tells her she has five husbands. But, oh boy can the truth hurt, sometimes. Even under the most liberal interpretation of the Law of Moses an individual was permitted only three divorces. But this woman had been divorced five times and in her latest relationship she hadn't even bothered to go through the pretense of a wedding.

She went around with tramps because she saw herself as a tramp. And if she had gone to the synagogue, which I'm sure she never did, in her mind she would have thought that the voice of God would say to her what she knew people were thinking about her: "You're no good. Your presence here defames the synagogue."

Jesus' blunt words hit a little too close to home and his penetrating observation makes her squirm. She attempts, cleverly, to change the subject. She perceives that Jesus is a rabbi, and what better subject to talk to a preacher about than religion. "Sir," she says, "I perceive that you are a rabbi. Our fathers worshipped God on this mountain but you Jews say that the proper place to worship God is in Jerusalem. Who is right?"

But Jesus doesn't bite. Jesus says, 'the time is now when God the Father will be worshipped neither in Jerusalem nor on Mt. Garazim. God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.' In other words, the place of worship is not as important as the integrity with which you bring to worship.

If you want to talk religion, he is saying, that is fine, but the most important subject in religion is you. Can you hear Jesus saying that? You want to worship and that is good. But where you worship, on this mountain or that, in your home or in your car or on the golf course, in this church or that church, matters little as long as you worship in spirit and truth.

The Samaritan woman is shocked by this prophetic insight. "Sir", she says, "I know that one day Messiah, the one who is called Christ, will come and he will tell us all things". Jesus answered: "I who speak to you am he."

Did you know that this is the first time in all of scripture that Jesus' messianic secret is revealed. Jesus lets his true identity be known. And look at how it happens. He doesn't reveal his identity to the Sanhedrin or the Jerusalem Bar. He doesn't make this

pronouncement at the Temple or to a priest. He makes this announcement - that history has been waiting for—the hopes and fears of all the years to this Gentile, this woman, this outcast among a people of outcasts.

Why did he choose her? I think there's a hint found in a single verse in Matthew 11:25 where Jesus, praying to God, says: "I thank you father that you have hidden these things (these "truths") from the wise and revealed them instead to babes."

Now, at this point the conversation between Jesus and the woman is cut short by the disciples return. They're stunned to find Jesus talking with a Samaritan woman, and scripture says that they didn't say a thing. It's the only time in scripture that Peter didn't have a comment to make. He had an opinion on everything but even he is stunned.

As are the other disciples. She's found what she came to the well to receive. **She has found her water in Jesus Christ.** Living water. She sees the truth in Jesus' words. She sees him as Messiah. This is the second step in finding living water for a thirsty soul, recognizing and accepting Jesus' as the Messiah.

And notice what the woman does. She leaves abruptly, leaving her water jar at the well, and runs back to her village to tell the people what she experienced. You can't tell the story until you first believe the story. You can't be convincing unless you've been convinced.

She gets the entire town all stirred up, she gets people who wouldn't give her the time of day to listen to her rantings, and this crowd of people climb the hill toward Jesus. And Jesus, seeing this, turns to his disciples and says: "You say that there are four months left in the harvest. I say to you - lift up your eyes and see that the fields are ready for the harvest."

Jesus is telling the disciples to stop drawing boundaries around the kingdom of God. To not limit its scope. No people, no race, no gender, no sinner is exempt from God's grace. The time for the harvest is now and the people who need the Kingdom of God are all around.

And here's the third step in finding living water for a thirsty soul. **When we have filled our cups, the living water spills out all around us.** We bring the living water with us wherever we go. The grace we receive changes us, makes us reach out, and empowers us to move beyond our normal habits.

It's interesting to note that in her enthusiasm to tell her story, she lost the shame of her sin. She came to the well in solitude; she returns with a congregation. She came to the well disgraced; she returns as one graced!

And the villagers ask Jesus if he'll remain with them. So many villages in Galilee ask Jesus if he would leave; this one asks him to stay. And he does - for several days. And when his time there is over, the townspeople say to the woman: "It's no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard him ourselves and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the World."

It's no longer second hand; it's a firsthand witness. It is the strongest witness in the world. No one can argue against it. It's a witness that says, yes, I know that it's true because I have experienced it in my own life.

The pages of history have not changed the village of Sychar too much. At night there is still the same howling, lonely, wind that blows against the blistering sand. The well, well, it's there, too.

And there's something else that hasn't changed or vanished with the ages either. The living water that's offered to you and to me this morning. Drink from it and you shall never thirst.