

## “Sir, You Have No Bucket”

John 4:5-42

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One way to study the history of civilization is to look for the locations of the water wells or the oases, and to notice how community forms around these life-giving fonts of H<sub>2</sub>O. Where there's a well, there's life! A quick glance at the Biblical narrative takes us to the well where Abraham's servant met Rebecca, the woman God had in mind for Abraham's son, Isaac. It's a precious scene. The servant kneels at the well and prays for guidance in finding the right bride. He opens his eyes to the sound of Rebecca offering to give him a drink for he has no bucket with which to draw, and then offering to water all his camels as well! The servant is moved by her kindness and knows she is the one!

Read a little further and we come to the well where Jacob met and fell in love with Rachel. He was running away from home, had grown desperately lonely, and found himself at a village well designated for watering the livestock. The well was covered with a rock too large for one person to budge. But when Rachel arrives tending her father's sheep, he is stirred by her beauty and mysteriously finds the strength to remove the stone. The sheep are watered. And Jacob kisses Rachel. It is a precious scene there by the well.

Fast forward about 8000 years to the 1950's, to the 300 block of Main Street in South Glastonbury. We are standing in Marian Standish's front yard, next to her well. Once again, the electricity has gone out and the neighbors are lining up with buckets to draw water for the household chores. Marian is there telling a story. Mrs. Tricka is there listening. Donnie and Butch Noble are there waiting their turn, small-talking with Molly and Buffie Lewis.

Mrs. Triblets and Mrs. Dutton are not far away, lugging their empty buckets for a refill. This is a colorful image of community burned onto the mind of a young boy from down the road at the corner of Main Street and Kimberly Lane. It's an image of neighbors coming together to satisfy all kinds of thirsts.

Throughout the centuries, it's been at the village well where people meet, where community is formed, where hope is renewed, and where, occasionally, people fall in love! It's why I like to take my coffee break at the fountain near the inter-section of Hebron Avenue and Main Street. That fountain is the closest thing we have to a village well!

Thus, it is so appropriate and symbolically powerful that the woman of Samaria meets Jesus of Nazareth at the village well, the very location where life has always been affirmed and celebrated! This woman of Samaria approaches the well focused on the physical thirsting we all understand. It is a thirst of the tongue and the throat, on down to the stomach. It recurs every few hours. She comes to the well because she needs a cool drink. She is thirsty. I can identify with that! The deacons provide me with a glass of cool drinking water, right here under the pulpit, every Sunday! In addition to this being the pulpit, it's the South Church well!

Jesus engages her in a conversation that puts her in touch with a different kind of thirst, a thirst she's had for a very long time, a thirst she has ignored, a thirst not satisfied by a cool drink. It's a thirst for experiencing the sacred side of her life. Reading the story in this way, the woman of Samaria becomes a universal woman, a universal human being. As she becomes conscious of this deeper thirst, so do we all become conscious of the deeper thirst, the thirst for knowing our lives are worth more than what meets the eye, that our lives have an eternal dimension, a reality beyond what is physical and perishable, that we have a soul that transcends time and space.

Jesus sees in this woman what she has not yet seen for herself, that she has worth, that she has an eternal soul, that she, too, is made in the image of God! By the way he talks to her, he awakens this deeper thirst. He makes conscious what had been unconscious. He addresses this deeper thirst by offering her the Living Water, and she, not yet knowing what he's talking about, notices he has no bucket; thus her statement, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"

Scholars have debated over all the centuries what this Living Water is. I do not claim to be a Biblical scholar. But I would put it this way. The Living Water is the courage to believe. Courage to believe is a gift. It is the key that opens the treasure chest of abundant life. When I read this whole story of the Samaritan Woman at the Well from beginning to end, what I see is an astounding transformation. She is a different woman when she leaves the well from the woman she was when she arrived at the well. The deeper thirst has been named and satisfied. She has been given courage to believe there is a living God! There is a living God who heals what is broken. There is a living God who redeems what has been rendered worthless. There is a living God who meets us in the dry, parched, thirsty places and grants us courage to believe again.

It takes courage to believe. It really does! Where does this courage come from? I tell you, it is a gift.

Yesterday, I attended the funeral for Lew Miller in Southampton, Massachusetts. When I was a teenager living in Westfield, I attended the church where he was a deacon and a dad and an embodiment of generous hospitality. Sledding on the hills at the Miller farm always culminated in hot chocolate and brownies. Skating on his pond always concluded with a bonfire and those gooey chocolate marshmallow graham cracker s'mores.

He paid attention to the teenagers, perhaps because he had four of his own, but perhaps because he knew the teen years can be dry and thirsty. When I finished high school and was packing my bag for college in San Antonio, Lew Miller seemed to know how very thirsty I was. He showed up at the front door of our house wearing his ten gallon hat, and handed me four envelopes, four letters of introduction to his best friends in San Antonio, Texas, friends who could open certain doors for me. Receiving these four, unsolicited letters was like receiving the Living Water. It was as if this Lew Miller man believed in me more than I had believed in myself. He was giving me the courage to believe. I didn't have a clue how I would ever use these four letters, but it was enough, on that day, just to have them in my hand. I was thirsty and he gave me a drink.

On Good Friday, we'll get to the part of the Passion Narrative where Jesus is on the Cross and cries out, "I thirst!" The soldiers standing near by respond by offering a sponge dipped in vinegar. But they are missing the point. His thirst on the cross has nothing to do with the tongue or the throat. His thirst is the same as the thirst revealed by the Samaritan woman at the well, a thirst for one final affirmation that my life is sacred, and that in some mysterious way my life is eternal in the heavens.

I don't keep a bucket in the back of my gray Chevy pick-up truck. But I do encounter a lot of thirsty people. I have come to understand ministry as a matter of gifting people of all ages with courage to believe. It's how I understand my ministry. It's one way to understand the ministry of the church, offering to one another the courage to believe. This is how the text was speaking to me this week, and as always, I share this reflection with you in the greatest of hope. Amen.