

Sermon, March 12, 2023

John 4:1-15
"Living Water"

This passage begins telling us that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was baptizing more people than John the Baptist (although it was the disciples doing the baptizing) , But the Pharisees probably saw that as a threat, so Jesus thought it best that he leave Judea, and return to Galilee. This meant that he would have to travel through Samaria.

To fully appreciate what happens next requires understanding the cultural and religious issues that this raises. We are told that Jesus feels tired and sits down next to what was known as Jacob's well. A Samaritan woman approaches the well, and the text tells us that it is about noontime. That is significant because the women of that community would generally go to the well together in the early morning when it was cooler out. But this particular woman goes to the well alone in the noontime heat. If we were to read ahead, we find that this woman lives with a man that she is not married to. This would have made her an outcast in the community, leading her to go to the well alone so as to avoid her neighbors.

Jesus then asks her for a drink of water. The woman is surprised, and asks, " How is it that you, a Jew, ask of a drink of me, a Samaritan woman?" To begin with, the Samaritans were a despised people among the Jews, and did not associate with them. Furthermore, due to certain regulations at the time, for Jesus to drink from a vessel handed to him by a Samaritan would render him ritually unclean - which is to be understood not as physically unclean, but spiritually unclean, and would require a rite of purification. Of course, such a belief is not exclusive to the Jews. Within our own Christian tradition our rite of baptism symbolically washes us clean of our sin, which we can perceive as spiritual uncleanness.

Secondly, there is the simple fact that Jesus was talking to a woman. In the culture of the time a man did not address a woman he was not related to, especially in public.

So what we see in this story is Jesus breaking down all sorts of cultural and religious barriers. He is recognizing both Samaritans and women as his equal. This speaks to the conflicts that arise in the early church when the Gospel is being spread among the Gentiles, and it speaks volumes to conflicts that arise today due to beliefs of religious exclusivity. Not only do we have to break down walls that separate different factions within the Christian Church, but peace in the world requires a greater openness and welcoming of other religious traditions such as Judaism , Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam.

But the primary focus in the story is that which Jesus calls living water. When the woman asked Jesus why he would ask her, a Samaritan women, for a drink he turns the table on her

saying that if she only knew who he was, she would have asked him for a drink, and he would have given her living water. But she doesn't understand what he is saying, and points out that he has nothing with which to draw water from such a deep well. What she is failing to understand is that he is not talking about H₂O, but, rather something of a spiritual nature. But what is this living water?

I think there is more than one simple answer. To begin with, as the story continues, we hear that not only was she not married to the man she was living with, but she had been married five times before then. If any of those previous husbands were still alive, then according to the law of the time she was guilty of adultery, a major sin! Perhaps we can see in her case that the grace of God was one aspect of the living water, i.e. , grace in the form of mercy and forgiveness. I'll have more to say about that next Sunday when we look at the story of the woman caught in adultery. We also have to keep in mind that water has to do with cleanliness, not only in the physical sense, but the spiritual as well. In the act of baptism we are washed clean, meaning the washing away of our sin.

We learn of such godly mercy and forgiveness in the hearing of the Gospel - the Good News that in and through Jesus Christ we are cleansed of sin, forgiven, and made new. We come to recognize that fact through something called faith! When we ground our faith in God revealed to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ we become born anew - born from above. In such faith we are also opened to the infilling of the Holy Spirit, and in that Spirit such faith becomes a well of living water springing up to eternal life.

And, so, Jesus invites us to come to the well, to quench our spiritual thirst, to find a life of greater freedom from sin and death, a life open to a greater trust in and deeper relationship with our Creator!
Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious God, always loving and kind , we praise your Holy Name and offer thanksgiving for all the blessings of this life. We are grateful for your gift of your Son , Jesus,, and for the living water that he offers us. May we drink of it deeply that we truly know you through the presence of your Holy Spirit he among us and within us. We thank you that you are a God of mercy, and in your grace bring us forgiveness for our sin, and grant us New Life, as well as life eternal. On this day we we thank you for the life and Christian witness of St. Patrick. May we follow his lead in proclaiming the Gospel in a world much in need of peace, justice, and harmony. Amen.