

Message: "Our Common Thirsts" - 3-8-26

Scripture: John 4:5-42

⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. ⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." ¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." ²⁶Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

²⁷Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" ²⁸Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him. ³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." ³²But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." ³³So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" ³⁴Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." ³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Humans everywhere and throughout history have always held some things in common - and nothing is more common than our basic biological needs. We need to eat; we need to drink; we need clothing for protection and warmth; and we need

shelter from the elements and sometimes, sadly, we need shelter from each other. Today's scripture passage - one of the longest of the year - centers on thirst, beginning with a Jesus who is biologically thirsty as he enters the Samaritan village of Sychar. He arrives at a place where thirst is addressed, the watering hole known as Jacob's well, a place well acquainted with bodily salvation in terms of the life-giving provision of water in the middle of the semi-arid desert. Places like Jacob's well must have been so much more essential to community consciousness and individual security than we can even imagine today; in the semi-arid area of the well, access to water was a matter of survival; sources of fresh water were relatively rare and thus extremely important in ways we can scarcely relate to today in our turn-of-the-faucet easy access to clean water. It is no wonder that they were often places of reverence and solidarity, but also places where people vied for control and privileged access.

The woman likely employed a long-practiced social protocol regarding her approach to the well for such geographical reasons; but there were cultural influences as well. This being Jacob's well, the well attributed to the offspring of the Jewish patriarch Isaac, son of Abraham, and thus strongly identified with the Jewish people, they had first dibs, so to speak - in other words, Jewish patrons had particular entitlement to its use over and above other peoples. The woman, being a Samaritan, belonged to a people denigrated by the Jewish community; this automatically placed her on a lower tier for its use. As a woman, it would knock her down another notch for the lesser status of her gender overall. But then, she was seen as even less worthy due to her social status as a much-divorced adult female. Wrong people, wrong gender, wrong marital status - she had at least these knocks against her, making her a pretty shunned and rejected individual not very welcome at that place. (think of our country's shameful history when a black person didn't dare to drink from a water fountain labeled "Whites only"). She likely had a very weak claim upon the well itself, let alone any expectation of respect or consideration with anyone who happened to be nearby.

These things are important to keep in mind as this scene with Jesus unfolds. Jesus begins with his need for water, asking the woman for a drink. She does not hide her shock over how many cultural boundaries he is breaking simply by talking with her - but that's Jesus for you. They then begin one of the most profound metaphorical tennis matches in scripture, moving back and forth between thirst and water understood as applying to both biology and spirit - water as H₂O and water as the Spirit of Life. Jacob's well represents physical hydration whereas

Jesus represents spiritual provision. It is a powerfully relatable image, to thirst for the things that give life here and now, and the things that give life for all time.

But thirst is a funny thing; so very often, it is our thirsts that get us into trouble; very often, the things we humans thirst for do not give life but take it away. A personal example takes me back to my Seminary days, where the four basic food groups were coffee, energy drinks, espresso, and anything else that could keep one awake all day and often all night. One day, my roommate and I calculated out that we each drank on average a gallon of coffee every day - this, I do not recommend; we were awake all the time for study and classes and especially for exams, but we also felt sick all the time - even placing my roommate in the emergency room with an acute case of acid reflux. It was evident that our thirst for coffee had indeed become toxic.

Sometimes our thirst becomes toxic; we drink things into our lives that make us sick. Moving beyond coffee, and moving into more spiritual dimensions, we drink into our hearts and minds things that promise power or greatness or energy or absolution but wind up delivering their opposites; over time, in fact, they fail absolutely, leading only to moral degradation and spiritual poverty. We find so very many examples of this today. Many of our toxic thirsts take physical life through the violence of warfare; our president's war of choice with Iran is only the most recent horrendous example with rising death counts qualifying the depravity. Many of our toxic thirsts are centered in greed, where the haves strive to have more than they could ever need while leaving more and more people with less and less; the inequity is blinding. Many of our toxic thirsts issue forth from hubris, where far too many people in power believe their opinion should carry the weight of fact or that their will overrides any debate or that they think the law applies to everyone but themselves.

One of the most egregious examples of toxicity has to do with a thirst for the end of the world, translated by military leaders to soldiers on the Iran war front; a Non-Commissioned Officer, representing 15 troops, lodged a complaint recently, reporting that a gross distortion of the Christian faith occurred when their military commander stated that (and I quote) "President Trump has been anointed by Jesus to light the signal fire in Iran to cause Armageddon and mark his return to Earth." Many saw how dangerous this understanding is when used as a tool for motivation to kill others. I don't have words strong enough to condemn such errant and blasphemous faith understanding - suffice it to say that it is

always wrong to provoke God, especially to attempt to provoke God into doing something completely against God's nature.

We thirst for blood, we thirst for power, we thirst for superiority, we thirst for wealth, we thirst for Armageddon, we thirst for vengeance, we thirst for our own will to be done - and as we obey such thirsts, we poison ourselves and our world. We fail to see how the drinking of such toxins always degrades life over time, no matter how good the first drink tastes. Yet, we continue to drink such toxic brews - and in copious amounts. No matter how much of these toxic brews we drink, however, they never satisfy.

I found this on the shelf of our local grocery store - it is a can of "Liquid Death" water. I have a feeling it sells pretty well, as do the various beverages that have warnings on their labels about pregnancy risks, machine operation impairment, increased cancer risk (breast, liver, colon), development of hypertension, and increased risk of dementia. We find it somehow morbidly attractive to drink in these things, to drink in death, to ingest things into our bodies that cause harm; and we do this with our souls as well. We drink in hatred and vengeance and prejudice and envy as choices regarding how we look upon others and even ourselves; we see others as expendable to our cause, or see ourselves as expendable in our worth. What makes this outrageous is that we are the ones who choose to drink these things into our lives, fully aware of the potential harm they represent - and we are the ones who continually face the dire consequences of those choices, consequences for ourselves in our diminished health of body and spirit, but also consequences for others detrimentally affected by our choices.

Jesus is making the point to the woman at the well, as he is making it to us today, that we can always choose better. We can satisfy our thirst with living water which is not found on any grocery store shelf; we can satisfy our need for spiritual hydration by being careful with what we take into our hearts, into our minds, and into our lives, to make sure it is from a trusted source. Yes, it is the living water Jesus represents, but it is as much the commonsense humanity that God's son represents as it is anything cosmologically profound. Shape your thirsts, says Jesus, according to what works for humanity, what works for creation, what works for the good of yourself and others; drink in the power of unconditional love for yourself, and receive it fully by giving it away; ingest the graciousness of mercy for yourself and others; gulp down the kindness that always fills the hearts of both the giver and receiver; take in the task of lifting up the

lowly, of standing with the oppressed, of speaking truth to power and integrity into corruption. Be thirsty for these things, says Jesus, and find your thirst satisfied in ways complete and enduring - something the world alone can never provide.

On a shelf somewhere is another bottle of water labeled "Liquid Life." Its ingredients include things like unconditional love, forgiveness, and truth. It's available everywhere, and it's free for the taking. There is, however, a warning label on that bottle which states that if the contents are ingested, the drinker must be aware that sacrifices may present themselves for us to face, and that we will find ourselves involved in the risks of love on all fronts, from the challenge of loving those who are difficult to love, to loving those who would seek to do us harm. But there is also a prescriptive label on that bottle, saying that if one drinks the contents regularly, it will lead to life, and life abundantly; all associated with the one who drinks will become exposed to a contagious hope that will help satisfy their thirst as well. You see, it is impossible to drink in the water of life alone; the living water of Jesus is given to community where love becomes possible as it is made primary; it is meant to flow through ourselves and others. Living water becomes foul if one tries to keep it to oneself; it must breathe through sharing if it is to remain fresh and life giving. That's what Jesus demonstrated with the woman at the well, who experienced the living water of non-judgmental affirmation and caring attention; that's what the woman demonstrated in her enthusiasm of sharing her experience with others that they may know her joy at being loved; and that's what each of us may demonstrate as we allow the love of Jesus to shape our thirsts in all places with all people.

Let us be careful with our thirsts, to shape them according to things worthy of God. Let us choose wisely what to drink to satisfy those thirsts, avoiding things toxic to God's nature. And let us make sure to invite others to drink with us in the fellowship of all who thirst for abundant life, trusting that the well provided by God will never run dry.