

“Living Water”
John 4: 1-26

First Presbyterian Church
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What do you really need? What is it that your soul longs for? That’s the question that I want you to hold in the back of your head this morning. Because it’s the question that this wonderful story of in John 4 is dealing with.

Have you ever had travel issues? I know, great question to ask after a couple of weeks like the ones we just had. Last weekend, when we went to our Presbytery meeting in Laurel, MS, the churches from Houston couldn’t make it. And they couldn’t make it because the Atchafalaya bridge was closed. Interstate 10 wasn’t working. That’s a travel issue.

And on the way home from that Presbytery meeting, I got stuck on I-12. For about 45 minutes I sat in my car with my engine off.

That’s nothing of course compared to folks in Atlanta and Birmingham this week, many of whom slept in their cars or in other people’s homes because they couldn’t go anywhere on the roads.

As we open our story, we see that Jesus actually has a travel problem. He wants to get from Judea to Galilee, but here’s the problem. Samaria is in the middle of those two places. And “in the middle” is a great way to describe Samaria in a number of ways. It is geographically in between two areas of Jewish territory.

It’s also culturally in between. See, nearly 700 years before Jesus, the northern kingdom of Israel, with its capital in Samaria, had strayed from the Lord and ended up being conquered by Assyria. And the Assyrians, in order to wipe the culture out completely, deported thousands of people and then imported thousands of others. So what was left was a mix of races and cultures. The area of Galilee had kept its Jewish heritage but Samaria had not.

And it was religiously in between as well. All that mixing had created a mixed up religion. A new, combined religious system that worshiped the Lord, but not in the way He had prescribed.

So Jews and Samaritans didn't get along. They disagreed on most things. There was racial and religious tension. And the normal route from the south of Israel to the north was around Samaria. So that you didn't even have to deal with them.

But that's not the route Jesus chose to take. In fact, John says that Jesus HAD to pass through Samaria. Why? Maybe the regular roads were closed. Maybe it was like Baton Rouge and when it dropped below 40 all the roads shut down. Maybe.

But I think John is trying to tell us something different. Jesus HAD to go through Samaria. He's not in the synagogue with people gathered around him. He's not even in Jerusalem where someone like Nicodemus can come and find him. He's on the move. Jesus, in fact, has a habit of coming TO people. That's who Jesus is. He is a Seeker.

Jesus says later in this passage that the Father is seeking worshipers. But that theme is all throughout the Bible. The Lord seeks. In Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve sin, it's the Lord who seeks them out... "Where are you?" God's people end up in slavery in Egypt and God seeks them out to rescue them. Throughout the Bible, Israel strays from the Lord and He seeks them out. Jesus, God himself, takes on human form to become one of his creatures so that he might seek us out. Why would he go through Samaria? He HAD to. It's what He does.

I read the other day of a man in Birmingham who suffered a traumatic brain injury on the day of the ice storm. He was in one hospital but the surgeon who was scheduled to do surgery on his brain was in another hospital. And the roads were all shut down. Cars were parked on the highways and there was snow all over the ground.

And this surgeon walked six miles from one hospital to the other so that he could perform surgery on this man's brain. It saved his life.

Why would someone walk 6 miles in the snow? Because he Had to. The same reason Jesus finds himself sitting on the edge of a well in Samaria. Jesus is a seeker. It's what he does.

And who has He sought? Who is he talking with at this well? A very unlikely conversation partner. We saw last week Jesus talking to Nicodemus, a very respected, very pious, very righteous Jewish teacher and leader. The person Jesus sits down with now is the anti-Nicodemus. She's the polar opposite. But she finds herself in a lengthy discussion with Jesus. A discussion that she can't believe is even happening.

And there are a few reasons for her surprise. The first is simply the "her" part. In that culture, Jewish men would not have interacted with women in public. It was not considered socially acceptable. Second, she's not only a woman, she's a Samaritan. And we've already noted why that would be an issue. Third, Jesus asks her for a drink but he doesn't have a bucket. The assumption is that she will give him a drink out of her own. Her own Samaritan, ritually unclean bucket.

And of course, we find out as the conversation goes on that she seems to have a checkered past. Which may also explain why she is even here. It's the sixth hour, which is noon. And here's a woman out drawing water. In the heat. This would have been just as dumb in that culture as it would be in ours. Women would normally come early in the day before it got hot and get their water for the day. And they would come in groups for conversation and protection—the well was outside of town.

But here she is all alone. It's reasonable to assume that she is there alone on purpose. Sychar is not New York City. If you've had five husbands, people probably know who you are. This is a woman who is marked by her shame. A woman who is known by her shame. A woman whose shame drives all she does.

There are women and men in this congregation who are marked by their shame. Whose shame is driving all that they do.

And it's coming at you from both sides: your real and true knowledge of who you are, your past, your current struggles and the expectations of the culture around you. What Brene' Brown calls the "web of unobtainable, conflicting, competing expectations about who we are supposed to be." The feeling of being dishonorable, worthless, inferior and of failing to live up to expectations. It's the real knowledge of your deep brokenness or the experience of being sinned against coming in contact with a world that says you have to live up to certain expectations.

Shame ultimately keeps us from believing that Jesus can come and heal us.

But here we are. A trip through Samaria and who does Jesus seek out? The most shameful woman in town.

Of course, it may be unsettling to see that Jesus doesn't dance around the issues. He comes straight to the heart of the situation. He doesn't do what many in our culture think might be the more loving thing to do, which is to put his arm around her and say, "it's going to be ok. There, there, you just don't worry about all those people. Everything is fine. You're good enough, you're smart enough, and doggonit, people like you!"

But would that be loving? Think of a child running in to see his mother crying and blood running down his leg. A nasty cut that clearly needs stitches. If the mother simply puts her arm around the child and says "there, there, everything is going to be just fine... we're not going to worry about that..." "That mother is clearly NOT loving her child. She's ignoring the real problem that needs addressing. And sweet talk about positive self-image is not going to solve the problem.

Jesus comes to the heart of the matter. She may try to hide it but for Jesus her shame is on full display and instead of avoiding it, he flies right to the center of it. He opens the wound. He addresses her brokenness. Her own sin. The sin of others. The deep wounds she feels and the issues that drive her entire life.

"You're right that you don't have a husband. You have had five. And even though you don't have one now, you are living with another man."

Jesus sees the heart of things. He sees the shame. He sees the brokenness. He sees what we would like to stay hidden. He sees the need. His words bring conviction.

He sees, in her words, "everything I ever did." Someone who told you everything you ever did. That sounds like a frightening experience. To be known like that. To be pierced to the heart like that. To be exposed like that.

Many of you know the great quote from the Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe. Susan is talking to Mr. Beaver and she is about to meet Aslan and she doesn't realize that he is a lion.

And Beaver says, "Aslan is a lion, the Lion, the great Lion." "Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "Safe?", said Mr. Beaver, "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

Someone who tells you everything you ever did does not sound safe.

Let's pause for a moment to simply ask the question, what would the story be if you met someone who told you everything you ever did? The shady business dealings. The flirtatious relationship with your co-worker. The way you really think about other races and classes. The secrets you keep in your office desk drawer or the back corner of your cabinet.

Our deepest failings. Our real and true knowledge of our sin. Those things are the foundation for the shame we feel in life. We all have it. We all deal with it because it is a human condition.

And we all have ways of dealing with it. Ways of either denying our shame or trying to cover it in some way, making us feel better for a little while.

Maybe your way is avoidance. Like this woman in the story. I'll put distance enough between myself and others so that I have a buffer. No one will be able to see my shame and no one will be able to hurt me.

Maybe your way is the way of perfectionism. Perfectionism is also a buffer. In order to keep you from coming too close to me, I will project an image of perfection. That will effectively cover my shame and keep you from ever getting close enough to know it. I feel inferior and worthless so I will project an image of perfection in order to fool you and me into believing that I am worthy.

But there is an insidious nature to the ways in which we try to cover our shame. The things that we believe will make us whole only leave us empty. The things that we turn to in an attempt to fulfill work for a while but in the end leave us worse off than we began.

Listen to what David Foster Wallace says, quoted by Tim Keller...

“Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god to worship is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It’s the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before your loved ones finally plant you in the ground. Worship power and you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And the most insidious thing about these forms of worship is that they are unconscious. They are default settings.”

David Foster Wallace is not a Christian. But he has hit it exactly on the nose. The things that we so often turn to to fill us, to satisfy us, to quench our thirst, do the exact opposite. They eat us alive.

And here is where the news gets really good. What Jesus offers is his own life-giving Spirit. Living water that never runs dry. His Spirit that fills our deepest needs and never runs out. His Spirit that strikes to the heart of our failings, our sin, our guilt and our shame and doesn’t simply provide kind words. He provides new life.

Jesus says that the Holy Spirit dwelling in a person will both heal and sustain. He addresses our deepest needs and cleanses us. He addresses our continuing needs and fills and sustains us. It overflows in immeasurable and uncontrollable ways. Even to those around us. Because of this spring of living water in this woman nearly an entire town is converted!

Imagine someone who tells you everything you ever did. Someone who exposes the most broken parts of you. Someone who gets right to the heart of your guilt and shame. And then covers your shame with His love. Fulfills you with His Never ending Spirit.

And so here’s our challenge in this passage. Jesus says to this woman, “if you knew who it was who speaks to you, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

If you knew, you would ask.

Do we know? Do we know what we really need and what will ultimately heal us? Do we know the things that we turn to for life that are in reality bringing death to us?

And do we know who it is who speaks to us? Do we know who it is who is calling us to himself? The Christ. The Son of God. The second person of the Trinity. The Lord, working through the Holy Spirit to draw us to himself. Speaking through His Word.

When we open up the Bible do we take note of who it is who is speaking to us? In many ways, of course, you do. It's why this church is so passionate about God's Word. Why we have stood on the side of God's inerrant Word even at great cost.

And when we come to the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, do we know who it is who is speaking to us through them. It's Jesus, coming to our pain and our shame and saying, "I have something that will never run out. Let me give it to you."

And finally, not only do we know but do we ask? Do we ask Jesus to give us what we ultimately need? To strip us of the things that we cling to to cover our shame? To rid from us these things that are eating us alive?

One commentator calls asking "belief exhaling." We inhale "I believe" and we exhale, "please." Asking is an act of belief. Even if that belief is small. This woman's asking is incomplete and confused. But it is asking nonetheless.

The Lord has sought us in our deepest need. And He has brought to us the greatest of provision. He has told us everything we ever did. And he has loved us by all that he has done. That's worth knowing. That's worth asking for.