

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
February 24, 2008
The 3rd Sunday in Lent
John 4:1-30, 39-42

Deep Thirst

She was so thirsty. Her water had run out last night, after dinner had been prepared and the dishes had been washed. When she woke up that next morning, her tongue stuck to the top of her mouth. She had really wanted to make a nice cup of tea that morning. Get breakfast cooked, send the man on to his work, do the few dishes, and then just sit for a few moments with a cup of tea in the quiet early morning. Just the thought of it made her mouth water.

As the sun began to rise, she sat at the window and tried to ignore her growing thirst. She heard the voices of the other women as they made their way down the path to the well. She turned her eyes to the empty water jar that stood next to the door. She was so thirsty. Just a few drops of water would keep the taste of dirt out of her mouth. Just a few drops of water would calm her irritated throat. All she needed was just a few drops of water from that well, Jacob's well. She looked again at the empty water jar, looked again out the window to the path the other women had traveled, and shut her eyes in disgust and anger.

All she may have needed was just a few drops of that water, but she did not dare go get them now. Not while all the others were there, talking and laughing. No matter how thirsty she was, she did not dare go to get water when others were around. It hurt too much to do it. She was too wounded from the years of stares and silence, from the slicing words of hate and the cold way people turned their backs to her whenever she appeared. They all thought they knew her and everything about her. She had been through five husbands for goodness' sake. And she was not even married to the man with whom she now lived. What else did they need to know? She was clearly a woman of ill repute, to put it politely. They thought they knew all about her. But she knew they did not know her at all.

They did not know how her heart had broken each time each time a husband had died and each time she had been required to marry yet another brother. They did not know how she dreaded wedding after wedding, growing so thirsty for love, yet never having her thirst quenched by the men who married her purely out of family obligation and treated her simply as part of the household property. This last brother had not even bothered to marry her at all. Why should he? It did not affect his reputation. There was certainly no love lost between them. All those women at the well thought they knew everything about her. But they did not know anything at all.

And yet, the stares, the gossip, the hateful comments—all of it kept her from going to the well early in the morning with the others. It did not matter how thirsty she was, she was not about to put herself through that again. So each morning she would sit in her thirst and wait. She would wait until the sun was straight above her home, bearing its rays down on the ground, causing the air to stand still with its heat. When she could barely stand to be in her hot home any longer, she knew it was safe to finally go and try to quench her thirst at the well. Like going to a grocery store at midnight, she knew that going to the well at noon would keep her from running into anyone she knew. It would keep her from running into anyone at all.

So you can imagine why she was shocked and horrified to see that man sitting there when she arrived. Not only was there someone else at the well, but it was a man. And, not only was it a man, but it was a Jewish man. Jews and Samaritans had been estranged for centuries. Jews thought Samaritans were unclean because of the intermarriage with non-Israelite groups that had taken place after the Assyrians had invaded almost 750 years earlier.

Furthermore, the two groups strenuously disagreed as to the proper place to worship. The Jews said it was at the Temple in Jerusalem. The Samaritans countered it was on Mt Gerezim at Jacob's well—the exact place where this strange man was sitting. The exact place she had come at noon, desperate to quench her thirst.

She almost turned around and left with her water jar still empty. But, she was so thirsty. She could not imagine going any longer without something to drink. So she kept walking to the well. She would not make eye contact. He looked like he might be resting, anyway. His eyes were closed and his posture looked relaxed. She wondered where he had been, why he was so tired, and why on earth he was there in Samaria. Jews avoided Samaria like the plague. They would walk around it, going from Judea to Galilee, or vice versa. No one went through it. All these thoughts ran through her head as she quietly tried to lower the bucket into the well. Then she heard his voice.

“Give me a drink,” he said. She was not sure what she was supposed to do. She knew that a Jewish man talking to a Samaritan woman in public was a no-no. Surely he knew too. She kept her eyes downcast and tried gently to remind him. “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” Maybe that would stop the conversation. Plus, she was the one who was thirsty. She was the one whose mouth and soul were dried out and brittle. She was the one who needed a drink, who needed the water. But, to her chagrin, the conversation did not stop.

Instead, he subtly switched gears. He told her that instead of him asking her for a drink of well water, she should be asking him for a drink of living water. Living water? For a moment, she forgot her thirst. She did not understand what he was talking about. She finally looked him in the eyes. When she did, she found she was not as scared as before. She actually felt a small surge of courage so she asked if he was greater than even their shared ancestor Jacob.

As she spoke, her dry mouth caught and she had to run her tongue over her teeth just to be able to finish her question. Her physical thirst was obvious. So before answering her question, he helped pull in the bucket full of the well's water. She eagerly took a quick sip, not wanting this odd conversation to stop. It had been years since anyone had included her in a real conversation. It had been years since anyone had looked her in the eyes without any tinge of disapproval. Goodness, it had been years since anyone had actually seen her at all. Her physical thirst could wait for a moment. She found herself overtaken by a thirst in her soul that she had not known she even carried. She was so thirsty for this kind of interaction. She was so thirsty to be seen. She was just so thirsty to be really and truly known.

He continued on, never taking his eyes off of her face. It was like he knew how dried out and thirsty her soul was, maybe even more than she knew. He kept talking to her about this living water, this water that would become a spring in her soul, gushing eternally. She did not

understand what he meant but it did not matter. She just knew she no longer noticed the hot sun. She no longer noticed the dust in her mouth. She no longer noticed the fact that she, a Samaritan woman, was talking to him, a Jewish man.

She only noticed that for the first time in years, she was feeling worthy. And she did not want that feeling to end. “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” She did not know exactly what he meant by this living water, but she figured it was something that would change her. She figured that it was something that would really quench her thirst—not her physical thirst, but her soul thirst. Maybe it would even be powerful enough to restore her. To restore her back to her community, but even more importantly, to restore her back to herself. To restore her to a fullness of life she had long ago forgotten. She was desperate for this living water.

“Go, call your husband and come back.” Those words fell on her as heavy as stone. She should have known it sounded too good to be true. She should have known that she would never been able to move beyond her past, that she was incapable of being a new creation, getting a new start. She became aware of her dry mouth again and took another sip from the jar. Oh well. She might as well be honest. She had nothing to lose. “I have no husband,” she said, eyes down again. “You are right,” he responded, “you have had five and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true.”

She was so stunned by his knowledge of her that she looked up again. And she was equally as stunned by what she saw in his face. She did not see the sneer she had grown accustomed to seeing. She did not see anger in his eyes. She did not see anything but genuine, honest interest in who she is. And even as dry as she felt at that moment, tears came to her eyes. She felt seen and known and received by this man. And he even knew everything she had ever done. But he still received her for who she was—a thirsty, soul-parched, person. Who was he? A prophet?

She decided to ask about that centuries-old worship question just to see what he would say. He took her up on it, talking not just about where to worship, but how—with a posture of openness to the freeing winds of the Spirit and God’s always-inbreaking truth. And through the whole discussion, she felt so alive. Her own spirit broke free from its prison and she surged with a hopefulness she thought she had lost long ago. “I know that the Messiah is coming,” she testified to this strange man. “And when he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.”

She was so sure of herself and her testimony. He saw the change in her—the change from the downcast, thirsty woman who had arrived at the well into this self-confident and courageous person of faith. He could not help but grin slightly at the transformation. And he decided right then and there to tell her something he had not told anyone else yet. He saw her for who she really was and he wanted to tell her who he really was. “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” There they stood—face to face—in a moment of full disclosure, each with no pretense about who they were. And she felt fuller and more whole and more worthy than she had ever felt in her entire life.

She was just about to respond when they heard footsteps and voices. The disciples were back. They came upon Jesus and this woman and were stunned to see them together at the well,

talking. They looked at her the way everyone always looked at her, well, everyone but Jesus. This time, though, she did not care. She was free from that. It did not matter to her what they thought of her or said about her. She did not cast down her eyes. Instead, she drew herself up, standing as straight and as proud as she felt. Her soul was bubbling with joy and hope.

She had been fully seen. She had been fully known. And she had been fully received by the Messiah. She knew her soul would never thirst again. Like Hagar in the wilderness, God had seen her in her distress and sent her what, rather, who, she needed. She was so free from the chains that had long bound her that she smiled at those disciples, turned one more time to look at Jesus, and ran off, leaving that water jar behind. She was clearly not thirsty anymore.

And do you know where she went? She ran right back into the town square—into the middle of all the people and all the activity. As she saw all of them, it struck her for a moment just how long it had been since she had been this public. But instead of feeling fear, she only felt courage. She was so full of that living water, so full of that encounter with pure grace, that she started shouting out her testimony. “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” she said laughing.

The people around her were stunned. Who on earth had this woman met? They barely recognized her. She was looking at them in the face. She did not seem to care if they talked about her. She was simply not afraid anymore. And not just unafraid, but bold. Something, someone, clearly had changed her. So they all left the city and went to see for themselves.

And when they met Jesus, they, too, were just as struck by him. They, too, found their own souls bubbling with joy and hope. They, too, felt seen and known and fully received. And in the middle of all of it, restoration showered down on that community. This woman who had been invisible for so long, she became their Gospel preacher. And not only did they see her, but they heard her. And, they received her.

And the body of the community that had been broken for so long was restored. And the soul of the Samaritan woman that had thirsted for so long was quenched. And Jesus stayed with them all for two days and invited everybody to the feast.

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Amen.