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Encountering God: What have we witnessed... through nourishment that meets our needs?

John 4:5-42

Purpose: To challenge congregation to recognize their thirst and needs that can only be quenched by Jesus' living water and to embrace the call to share that water and invite others to the well.

Today is the third Sunday of Lent. The third Sunday of intentionally entering into "the season of renewal through reflection on the life of Jesus" (Leader: Equipping the Missional Congregation Winter 2013/14, page 24). We have already looked at what have we witnessed in temptations and in our blessings. We delved into Jesus' journey into the wilderness and period of temptations. We named the amazement of Abram's faithfulness to go to a place that God would show him as God blessed him to be a blessing to many. We wondered with Nicodemus how someone might be born again.

Today we turn to looking at - What have we witnessed through nourishment that meets our needs? In our text today we find the very common element of water, something we all need to survive. Can you recall a time when you were really, really, really thirsty? I asked the MYF that question last week and one youth recalled the time he was having two-a-day football practices and the water trough was broke. Another youth recalled going hiking with his father and only having one water bottle and realizing too late that it was not enough water for both of them. I am sure that by now some of you are starting to get thirsty just talking about water, and perhaps as you begin to crave a cool refreshing drink of water, you also experience a mild rise of anxiety when you think about when or if you will be able to find clean water. Or maybe not? Several months ago it made the national news of how the water was contaminated around Charleston, West Virginia leaving hundreds of thousands without access to clean water. While that was devastating for many, I think that

we also need to be reminded that there is an estimated 780 million people around the world who lack access to clean drinking water every day (<http://water.org/water-crisis/water-facts/water/>). We need water. Animals and plants need water. Water is crucial for survival. Since the beginning of time humanity has been on the hunt for water, always asking where will water be found?

I invite you to turn with me to Exodus chapter seventeen. Here we find the Israelite community wandering in the wilderness. They have just experienced God's miraculous feeding through manna and quail, and suddenly they realized that they are quite thirsty, parched in fact. And so they have camped in a place where there is no access to water and they begin to quarrel with Moses saying "give us water to drink." Moses deflects the question by responding "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?" But they were still thirsty and continued to grumble "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" Then Moses at his wits' end cries out to God "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." Yes, the lack of water has been known to drive people to poor choices out of their anxiety and fear; remember we cannot survive without water it can become a matter of life or death.

The Israelites had a physical thirst for water. They had not been traveling in ideal travel accommodations. They were tired, they were weary, they were thirsty. And, there is no water to be had. I think that they were also thirsty for a confirmation that God has not abandoned them, has not left them. Remember they are just living into the gift of manna and quail and now they have relocated. I could imagine that they are suddenly asking what if God has forgotten us now? What if the manna is not here in the morning? What if God has deserted us? I have a need. God, we grumble against Moses but really we are grumbling against you. Where are you? Will

you provide? Well the Lord tells Moses to take his staff and strike a rock and that God would make it so that water flows from the rock, and that is exactly what happened. Moses calls the place Massah and Meribah which means testing and quarreling because they test the Lord asking “Is the Lord among us or not.”

Turn with me now to the gospel of John, to chapter four which Rebecca just read for us. Here we read another account of individuals on the hunt for water, of individuals who are thirsty. Now before we dive into the text we need to know some important things about the context of this text. If we do not know the background to the text we might read this text and just assume that it is a calm and perhaps even mundane conversation between two people each seeking a drink of fresh water. However, understanding the background informs us that this text is actually quite scandalous! Furthermore this text invites us to read it at various levels. So, what is it that we need to know?

First in verse four we are told that Jesus had to go through Samaria. Interesting to note the Greek word could be translated as “it is necessary”. John employed the same Greek word three times in chapter three in the story of Nicodemus. Looking back at chapter three we see in verse seven it is necessary to be born from above. Verse fourteen it is necessary that the Son of Man be lifted up. And verse thirty it is necessary for Jesus to increase. So, now as we come to verse four in chapter four we are told it is necessary for Jesus to go through Samaria. Suddenly we can grasp that this is not just happenstance that Jesus is here in Samaria, instead there is a greater purpose, a greater plan in place.

Next we are told by John that this exchange happens around noon. This should alert us that something is a little bit off because most women would have made the trip to the well early in the morning to avoid the afternoon heat. So we must wonder, why is this woman just now

coming to the well to retrieve her water for the day? Was she coming at this time to avoid the crowds of other women? Why would she want to avoid the other women? John also tells us that it is not just any woman but it is a *Samaritan* woman. The text will also remind us, through the words of the woman, that Jesus is a Jew. Again, on the surface perhaps this doesn't necessarily strike us as odd or even noteworthy. And perhaps when we hear that she is a Samaritan we immediately think of the well-known story of the *Good Samaritan* in Luke chapter ten and the shock that it was the Samaritan (almost said with disdain!) that came to the aid of the one attacked on the road.

Have you ever wondered why there was such hatred between Jews and Samaritans? It appears quite obvious that it is a long standing dislike that started long before Jesus or this woman appeared at the well. Willard Swartley is the author of the recently published *Believers Church Commentary on John* and he offers that "This enmity (hostility) developed and spiraled over centuries. Originating at the time of the exile of the Northern Kingdom (721 BC)" (Willard Swartley, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: John*, page 122). Well those who were exiled and then returned deemed themselves the holy seed or the faithful remnant "in contrast to those who had stayed in Israel and intermarried with the locals who practiced pagan worship. They thus became 'unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the lands (Ezra 9:11)'" (Swartley, 122). The Jews looked down upon the Samaritans because they were known to worship a number of idols and therefore their worship was not considered pure. The Samaritans were deemed to be outsiders, foreigners, unclean, unworthy, and part of those the Jews should hate and distrust. Therefore Swartley suggests "In light of the long-standing enmity (hostility) between Jews and Samaritans, readers (should be) are shocked by this intimately personal and deeply theological dialogue on issues that divided the communities" (Swartley, 123).

Not only should Jesus and the woman despise each other because one is a Jew and one is Samaritan, the story is also quite audacious as it overturns social and cultural norms of the day. I already mentioned that it would have been unusual for a woman to gather water in the middle of the day. Furthermore though “women were not to converse with men in public” and there were rabbinic texts “that forbid a man to publicly converse with a woman or even to greet a woman” (Swartley, 123-124). Not only have they broken those norms, John also offers that they are alone in this encounter and conversation.

Within the text Jesus asks the woman for a drink of water. The Greek verb in verse nine means to use in common, so it was as if Jesus and the woman were each eating a piece of pie and Jesus asks her to borrow her fork when she is done so that he can also eat his pie with the fork that she has already used. This would have clearly violated Jewish law. Again, the text is audacious in going against social and cultural norms of the day. Swartley notes that in this text “The breaches of religious and social boundaries, so culturally deep, are virtually unimaginable” (Swartley, 124).

So now let's look more closely at this text. It is noon and Jesus is tired from his journey and sits down by the well. While he was sitting there a Samaritan woman who goes unnamed, comes to draw water and Jesus said to her “Will you give me a drink?” The woman responds by stating some of the obvious observations. “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” So Jesus answered her “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that ask you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” And just like that Jesus shifts from talking about everyday life to everlasting life. Again the woman astute in her observations states the obvious. “Sir, you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?” Jesus again responds “Everyone who

drinks this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

The woman doesn't delay now and asks for Jesus to give her this water so that she won't be thirsty and have to keep coming to the well to draw water. She is quick to accept living water because it appears that it will meet some of her immediate needs, and also provide an outlet for her to avoid the pain of being an outcast in her society.

Jesus though continues in this grace filled conversation by changing subjects and tells her to call her husband. She only replies, I have no husband. Jesus says yes, that is right. You have had five husbands and the man you now have is not your husband. Fascinating. And yet Jesus just offered this woman living water, eternal life. And he knew her past, he knew her struggles, he knew her pain, he knew her thirsts, he knew her. And even in that knowing he still offers living water which once welcomed will become in her a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

The unnamed woman now grants that Jesus must be a prophet because he knows things about her life but perhaps he is forgetting that they have been taught that they are enemies. So she reminds him of one of the foundational issues between their people groups of where one should worship. I can almost imagine that she is desperately wishing that the living water could be for her as she is thirsty for acceptance, thirsty for true intimacy, thirsty for unconditional love, thirsty for meaningful conversation, thirsty to be enough. And yet she knows the social and cultural divides that are present that keep her boxed in her place, in her identity, in her hopeless situation. This unnamed woman then offers “I know that Messiah is coming and when he comes he will explain everything to us.” And Jesus simply declares “I am he.” I could imagine Jesus

saying to this hurting, lonely, afraid, and perhaps even bitter woman, I am the one speaking to you –

you the Samaritan woman,  
you the one who have been set aside as unworthy and unlovable by those around you,  
you the one with deep aches and pains that no one sees,  
you the one who comes to the well to avoid others,  
you the one who has thirsts that no one knows,  
you the one who feels great shame for who you are,  
you the one I have been told I should never talk to you...  
you the one I love,  
you the one I know by name in my heart,  
you the one I want to redeem,  
you the one I want to flood with living water,  
you the one I want to quench your thirsts,  
you the one I want to make whole,  
you the one I will die for.

As it sinks in to the woman who she is with, we are told in verse twenty-eight that she leaves her water jar and returns back to the town and said to the people “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did.” Remember, she is going back to the town and is speaking to the people, conceivably men and women, the same people that she went to the well at noon to avoid! And she is talking to them and they listen to her! They made their way to Jesus and we are told in verse thirty-nine “Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony... so when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them.” Remember the years and years and years of hostility between the two people groups? And look at the healing and the reconciliation that begins to emerge because of a woman, a Samaritan woman with a shady past, an outcast, someone deemed unlovely and unlovable, openly shares about her transformation of encountering the Savior of the World, the one who

offered her living water that is becoming within her like a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

I wonder if you were the one at the well with Jesus today what rationale you would provide for why it is quite scandalous or audacious for him to ask you for a drink of water? How would you answer if Jesus were to ask you, what do you thirst for? Or how would you answer if Jesus asked you, what are trying to quench your thirst with? There are many things that we use to attempt to curb the pain of the dehydration of our souls... food, exercise, alcohol, drugs, sex, companionship of friends, addictions, self-help books... all the while we don't embrace the invitation to come to the well to receive a drink of living water from the Savior or the world; to receive a drink of refreshing water which will become like a spring of water with a never ending water source which will lead to eternal life.

I wonder if you were the one at the well today with Jesus and you welcome the gift of living water with open arms. I then wonder who you are called to go and share the gift of living water with? The woman did not clutch the gift of grace for herself, instead she returned to the town and shouted and extended the invitation to all, even her enemies. Who in your life do you need to share the living water with?

In our moment of silence I invite you to reflect on what it would be like if you were the one at the well today with Jesus. How would your conversation go?

“Come to the Well”

In just a moment I will invite you all to come to the well, to receive a drink of cool refreshing, living water, freely offered to all by our Savior Jesus. Come to receive a drink of water as a reminder that it is only through Jesus that our thirsts will be quenched, that we will be able to receive forgiveness, and to embrace the grace that is extended to us. Come to receive a drink of water as a reminder of our calling to share living water with all in our lives, even those we have been taught that we should dislike or exclude.

Young and old, men and women, all are invited to the well to receive a drink of living water. You may make your way to one of the three tables and once there please take a cup and dip into the well of living water, and then enjoy the drink of water before placing the cup in the waste baskets provided. Please signal to Velma if you would like her to bring a drink of water to you at your seat.

During this time there will be a video giving a musical invitation to come to the well for all who thirst will thirst no more, and all who search will find what their souls long for, the world will try, but it can never fill, so leave it all behind, and come to the well.

Come to the well and drink of living water, graciously offered through Jesus.