

I. Introduction: (bottled water & "living water")

In my office I keep this stainless steel water bottle. It was a freebie a few years ago after I watched a documentary film, which was an expose on the incredible health & environmental costs of bottled water. I know some of you carry around your own aluminum or stainless water bottles & I'm slowly growing in that habit myself.

Of course, the bottled water industry is profitable partly because there's a never-ending demand, based on the second-most urgent physical need that our bodies have. After oxygen, our bodies can't go long without water. Most of us probably need to be drinking more water every day than we do.

But we don't ingest all of our water all at once. Just as most of us don't eat only once to last us through the whole day, we also keep getting thirsty and have to keep drinking throughout the day. This fact helps create a perpetual market for the bottled water industry.

Well, imagine with me something a little bizarre: In our Gospel reading Jesus offers "living water" which he says will cause those who drink it never to be thirsty again. What if someone could actually bottle and market such a thing? What if SoBe, or Nestle actually found a way to patent and mass-distribute some new "miracle hydration water"? ... What if you could buy a new kind of water so effective at quenching thirst that with one 20-oz bottle in the morning, you would be fully hydrated for the whole day?

Think about it: You wouldn't need to stop by the water fountain several times a day .. no need to carry that bottle around with you at work or in your car. You would not get thirsty all day long! Can you imagine how much they could charge for a bottle of this "miracle water"?

You & I know that no such "miracle hydration water" exists. Thirst is a frequently recurring fact of life. It is just a given. Thirst is one of the fundamental experiences of being human.

In Lent we are confronted with our own limitations, our own mortality, our own humanity. And today, we proclaim, "Restore us, O God! We thirst." So this morning, with biblical passages that center around people thirsting for water, I want to ask a key question:

II. How does Jesus respond to human thirst/human need?

From the story of Jesus & the Samaritan woman, I want to highlight 3 things Jesus does when he's faced with the thirstings of others:

A. He 1st admits his own thirstiness

1. Jesus admits that he's thirsty ... he shows that he has a need

- a) He is in the presence of someone that he is supposedly superior to ... so you'd think Jesus might try to appear self-sufficient or arrogant
- b) He doesn't try to project some image that says, "I don't need you" or "I wouldn't lower myself to drink YOUR water"

2. Instead Jesus identifies with her ...

- a) He shows that he's subject to thirst just like she is ... He identifies with her very humanity ...

b) Despite the obvious differences between them, he demonstrates he is not above accepting water from the hand of a Samaritan woman ... something his disciples would probably have refused to do

3. The fact that he & she are "different", with some tension between his people and her people ... that sort of leads to the 2nd thing Jesus does in this passage:

B. Next he shows compassion while at the same time not losing his own identity

1. To understand the amazing way Jesus relates with this woman, let's back up a bit & recognize the power of 1st impressions

a) Before a word is spoken between them, Jesus & this woman size each other up:

They know that they are from opposing "camps" ... and that they should be suspicious of each other

In fact, they know they shouldn't be having a conversation at all

b) Thru the Holy Spirit's power, he also knows about her difficult past in marriages and how she must not fit in well with the local people, or else she wouldn't be gathering water by herself in the heat of the day

2. So Jesus shows remarkable compassion to someone he wasn't expected to show compassion to

a) But when he reaches across that deep Jewish-Samaritan divide, he doesn't lose or minimize his own Jewish identity

b) Did you notice Jesus doesn't apologize for being a Jew?

He doesn't say this whole Jewish-Samaritan thing doesn't matter

He does not deny his heritage and just become some generic Yahweh worshipper in order to relate to this woman

3. In other words, Jesus retains a strong Jewish self-identity even while showing compassion to someone he was supposed to despise

a) Listen again to *verses 21-24*, & how Jesus talks about the Jewish tradition & the Samaritan religious tradition: (*read*)

b) Jesus does not apologize for being Jewish, but he declares that neither the Jews nor the Samaritans have a corner on the truth of how God wants to be worshipped

c) Jesus is confident about who he is as a Jew but not arrogant about it to the point of exclusiveness

4. So after admitting his own thirstiness, Jesus demonstrates compassion, which comes from a well-grounded faith identity

C. Here's the 3rd & most important thing Jesus does in the face of thirst: He responds to thirsts that are deeper than surface level

1. We know Jesus cared deeply about urgent physical needs of people. We just have to look at all his healing stories in the Gospels ... yet he also saw the deeper spiritual needs in people, the needs that were eternal in nature
2. Jesus wasn't satisfied to only pay attention to people's visible, physical needs ... he cared about their relationship with the Creator, about the condition of the heart
3. The Samaritan woman comes to the well that day expecting to get another jarful of water which will last only until the next day
 - a) But Jesus puts her in touch with deeper needs within her ...
 - The need for freedom from the baggage of her painful past, whether that came thru the divorce or death of 5 husbands
 - The need to see God as bigger than the limits of her own religious traditions & loyalties
 - The need to rise above selfish preoccupations and to also think of the greater good of her own people
 - b) In essence, Jesus is the ultimate thirst quencher ... he offers her living water that will gush up within her to eternal life
 - c) Jesus has the courage to move a mundane surface-level conversation fairly quickly to a deeper spiritual level

III. Here in Lent we, too, are faced w/ thirsts and needs all around us & within us ... but we can learn from Jesus in how we respond to thirst, whether that's literal or figurative

A. Just like Jesus, we too can admit our own thirstiness when we encounter others with some kind of thirst

1. This means when we want to help someone in need, let us try to identify with them in that need, rather than acting as if we have all the answers and the resources
2. It means we come to those in need with a readiness to learn or receive something from them ... We do not pretend that we ourselves are not needy
3. This is one reason why at this church we avoid going on traditional "service trips" or short-term missions
 - a) I'm talking about when the foreigners come into a poor country with hammers and paintbrushes, spending lots of money doing work that local underemployed people could have been paid to do, but it makes the foreigners feel good to be "serving"
 - b) Instead, when we wish to get involved in service in a place very different from our own, we make sure we are also engaging in relationships with local people, taking time to learn from them

c) Hence we combine service and learning in places like Mashulaville MS, or Andrews SC ... and sometimes we don't pretend to serve overseas but we just go to learn, such as on Learning Tours in Honduras or Ecuador

B. In John chap. 4, besides admitting his thirstiness, we also see that Jesus got personally involved with those who were "different" ... yet he didn't compromise who he was

1. Sometimes, in trying to relate better to people we're trying to help, we may hide or relinquish our very identity

- a) We do this if we refuse to identify ourselves as Xians ... or if we describe ourselves always in generic Xian terms, never referring to any of the distinctives that make us Mennonite
- b) Jesus did not abandon his Jewish heritage nor his belief that the Jews were on the right track historically in following God

2. I believe it's OK to inhabit a particular tradition of Xianity, and to strongly support that tradition

- a) I remember Dale Schrag, who used to work in church relations at the Mennonite Bethel College in Kansas ... Dale said that denominations are not such a bad thing, even when the church appears fractured into thousands of them
- b) Dale is a strong advocate for the Anabaptist & Mennonite visions of Xianity, but he also doesn't wish that all Baptists or all Catholics would become Mennonites

Because no denomination is the perfect faithful body of Christ on earth, we all make contributions to the work of God's kingdom

Dale wants Baptists to be the best Baptists they can be, Catholics to be the best Catholics they can be, and Mennonites to be the best Mennonites we can be

3. Having said all that, whenever we occupy a particular Xian tradition, we must also humbly recognize that God can be worshiped within other traditions as well

- a) In today's story, Jesus tells his disciples they should not think they are the only ones who have labored in God's harvest ... hear him in 4:37-38
- b) So despite many of our own personal experiences as Mennonites, Jesus would remind us that the voice of God is heard clearly in many places other than Goshen IN ... or Newton KS ... or Lancaster PA

IV. Last November, the congregation was invited to gather around tables in the fellowship hall

A. We responded to some bigger questions ... such as what's important to us about our congregation, or what we might like to change about it

1. The last question for those conversations was about our dreams for our church ... I can't name all of the kinds of dreams Waterford people voiced around those tables, but I can summarize a few that were of a more missional nature:

- a) We heard dreams of more ministry to the marginalized and even the possibility of becoming a sanctuary church
- b) Another dream was about making more connections outside of ourselves ... with other Xians or with people of other faiths or with local schools
- c) Another commonly repeated word in those dreams was "diversity": either that we would reflect more diversity in our composition or that we would interact with more diverse people

2. I'm not sure that everyone meant the same things when dreaming about diversity, nor did I hear acknowledgment of the difficulties that diversity usually brings with it when groups that are usually separate start deliberately engaging with each other

- a) Some of us are in regular contact every day with people who are significantly "different" from us ...
- b) But some of us can spend all day long only interacting with people who look like us, grew up like us, and think just like we do

3. Still, that word "diversity" did strike a chord with many Waterford people as something God calls us to

- a) Diversity is a buzzword in the world we live in today, and I think we are only beginning to grasp the richness that God desires for us when we don't always surround ourselves with Xians exactly like ourselves
- b) Even so, diversity was not a cherished value in the world Jesus lived in ... separation from the world and purity were some of the dominant Jewish values Jesus grew up with
- c) As a missional challenge for all of us, I'd like to note one final thing we might learn from Jesus in this regard:

B. At Jacob's Well, Jesus chose to invest himself in an otherwise unnecessary relationship

1. Here was an awkward situation: Jesus was by himself in Samaritan territory, not with just any Samaritan person, but with a Samaritan woman

2. He didn't have to talk with her or even treat her as an intelligent religious person ...

- a) He could have ignored her, & avoided the hassles of small talk ... the hassles of learning anything about her life
- b) These strangers from different and hostile worlds could have silently acknowledged each other's presence & then gone their separate ways

3. Instead, Jesus took the risk of making a personal connection.

Illustration: Some of you are familiar with Christian sociologist, author & evangelist Tony Campolo, now in his 80's. Some years ago Campolo was in Honolulu, up late in a seedy café in the very early hours of the morning. He found himself in a similar situation, next to a stranger he had nothing in common with:

He was drinking coffee at the counter, when a group of prostitutes walked in and took up the stools around him. One of the girls, Agnes, lamented the fact that not only was it her birthday tomorrow but that she'd never had a birthday party.

Tony thought it would be a great idea to surprise Agnes with a birthday party. Learning from the cafe owner, a guy named Harry, that the girls came in every morning around 3.30, Tony agreed with him to set the place up for a party. Word somehow got out on the street, so that by 3.15 the next morning the place was packed with prostitutes, the cafe owner and his wife, and Tony.

When Agnes walked in she saw streamers, balloons, Harry holding a birthday cake, and everyone screaming out "Happy Birthday!" Agnes was overwhelmed. The tears poured down her face as the crowd sang Happy Birthday. When Harry called on her to cut the cake she paused. She'd never had a birthday cake and wondered if she could take it home to show her mother. When Agnes left there was a stunned silence. So Tony led the group, consisting of Harry, Harry's wife and a roomful of prostitutes, in a prayer for Agnes.

It was a birthday party rarely seen in Honolulu – thrown by a Christian minister for a 39 year old prostitute who had never had anyone go out of their way to do something like this and who expected nothing in return. Indeed, so surprising was this turn of events that Harry found it hard to believe there were churches that would do this sort of thing, but if there were, then that's the sort of church he'd be prepared to join.

Adapted from <https://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/compassion/>

V. Conclusion

A. Today we heard a powerful story of how Jesus Christ is the ultimate thirst quencher

B. Thru him we can learn how to be more more human in the ways we respond to the thirsts around us & within us

1. Like Jesus, we can admit our own thirstiness
2. Like Jesus, we can cross boundaries with compassion, even while not losing our own identity

3. And like Jesus, we might even dare to engage in otherwise unnecessary relationships ... You know what I'm talking about:

a) You find yourself unexpectedly sharing time and space with a stranger, (maybe in a lobby or office at school ... or waiting in line at the grocery store or sitting down beside someone at a concert or on a plane)

b) It looks like you have nothing in common with the other person.

You're tired, maybe a little stressed, and it's much easier to just stay in the awkward silence, & ignore that person,

Much easier to tell yourself "I'll mind my own business and hope they leave me alone." (Believe me ... I'm an introvert. I've done this many times)

C. The next time we're in such a situation, the example of Jesus would gently call us to be open to the Holy Spirit's nudgings, to humbly interact with that person anyway ...

1. not to be pushy or nosy, but to carry a gentle social curiosity, to be observant ... Do they appear jovial? Sad? Out of breath?

a) Are they wearing something really attractive or noteworthy that you could compliment them on?

b) Do they have a cute child or a pet that could be a conversation starter?

2. Establishing a nonthreatening bond of our common humanity can be all it takes for someone to share far more than they expected to share with us ... giving us the chance to listen well and possibly be the hands and feet of Jesus with a hurting person

3. Who knows?

a) Through the Spirit, we might turn a simple "cup of cold water," given from one thirsty person to another, into an opening for "living water"

b) We might just become a vessel for Jesus, the ultimate thirst quencher.

D. Invitation

1. Today we want to offer you just a symbol of that ultimate thirst quenching that Jesus provides

a) I urge you to be aware of the thirsting inside you that doesn't go away ... that only the healing love of Jesus will satisfy

b) Start looking for simple ways to open up connections with other people so that they might somehow glimpse some of that "living water" through you

2. While we sing "Rain Down" feel free to come up and get a drink of water to take back with you