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“Living Water”

John 4:1-30  
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Today I am starting a new sermon series on Simple Spirituality for ordinary people. My intention and hope is that these four sermons will highlight an accessible spirituality for people who do not feel particularly holy, righteous, worthy, but who want to grow closer to God, and experience God working in their lives. I do hope that includes you.

Our Scripture lesson is from the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John. It is a familiar story to many of us, this story about the woman at the well. It is one of my favorite stories in all of scripture because it has everything—interesting dialogue, surprising plot twists, grace, forgiveness, and redemption. It highlights the radical way in which Jesus reached out to undeserving and unsuspecting people and drew them into his unusual way of seeing the world.

The story begins with Jesus fed up with the pettiness and score keeping of the Pharisees. They are keeping track of the baptisms he performs, and setting up a little competition between Jesus and John the Baptist. So Jesus decides to go back with the disciples into Galilee. On the way, they must pass through Samaria and this is not a friendly place for Jews, in fact you could say it is a hostile place. Jews and Samaritans hated each other, based upon reasons nobody can really remember, but it is a historic animosity going back generations.

On the way to Samaria, they pass by Jacobs well, and Jesus tells disciples to go on into Samaria, while he waits at the well. A woman is on her way to the well to get water, walking with a jar balanced on her head, just as she does every single day, probably several times each day. She is most likely in her late 40s or early 50s and she has already been married and divorced 5 times, and is currently living with a man who will not marry her. So to say she was a hard living sort of gal would be an understatement.

She undoubtedly has regrets about her life. Being divorced 5 times is unusual even by today’s standards; it would have been highly unusual back then. It is possible that on these daily walks to the well she reflects upon her life, her choices, her mistakes, her broken dreams. I doubt if she felt good about herself or the path her life has taken. She has clearly been looking for unconditional love, wholeness and happiness her entire life. Something that would fill the emptiness and longing deep inside of her. And although she does not yet know it, as she walks to Jacobs well that day, she is about to discover those very things.

She arrives to find a man waiting for her. A man even hanging around the well is disconcerting in itself, but the fact that he is there to see her is completely disorienting. He immediately speaks to her, asking for a drink. By speaking to this woman Jesus breaks two prevailing norms of his time. He, a Jew, spoke to a Samaritan, and he, a man, dared to be alone with a woman, who was of no family relation whatsoever. This was highly improper, and it catches the Samaritan woman off guard. And not only does Jesus talk to her, he already knows all about her. He knows her life story, and yet he does not condemn her. Just as he did with the woman caught in adultery, offering those without sin to cast the first stone, here Jesus is kind, understanding and patient. He gently guides this poor woman and offers her something more, a spring welling up into eternal life, something that will quench her endless thirst for love and acceptance and understanding. He offers her the living water that can quench her never ending thirst.

She can hardly believe that this man who knows everything about her is there to offer her another way of life, a source of peace and happiness. She cannot believe that anyone who knew all about her past could possibly care for her. She is very skeptical, and so she tries to divert the conversation. Rather than talking about herself, she asks Jesus, "How are you going to drink from this well? Do you think you are a better man than our ancestor Jacob who dug this well?" She is nervous and possibly embarrassed, so she tries to take the focus off of herself.

In so many ways we are just like this unnamed woman, who is our sister in the faith. She meets God in the flesh, and yet she was so beaten by life, that she cannot accept the gift before her. Like her, we too carry around the baggage of things we have done or failed to do, mistakes, regrets, broken dreams. We lug them around like big water pots on top of our heads. And when we have the opportunity to set our pots down and replace them with cool refreshing acceptance and peace of mind, we get sidetracked. We try to impose our agenda on the situation. We move from the personal to the theoretical, from the deep to the shallow, from the scary to the safe. We can't believe God would meet up with us, so we don't make the time or the space in our lives for such sacred encounters to occur. We don't really trust that we too can come face to face with the living God, and so we stay thirsty. Sure, we say our prayers when we are sick or scared, we come to church out of habit, or routine, or to see our friends, instead of believing that someone is already here waiting for us. Someone who knows everything we have ever done and loves us still, someone who can quench our endless thirst with the fresh waters that spring up into abundant and eternal life.

In Greek mythology there is a story about King Tantalus. He was punished by the Gods in the underworld by being chained to a tree in a lake. The water level would rise up to his chin every day, but when he lowered his head to drink and quench his thirst, the water would immediately subside out of reach. Over his head were branches laden with juicy fruit, but every time he tried to reach them, they immediately withdrew. His hunger and thirst could never be satisfied, and yet the means of satisfaction was right before his eyes. King Tantalus has been immortalized by the English word “tantalize.”

Rather than tantalizing us with things we can never have, our God offers us true sources of spiritual refreshment. Sources that are outside of us and also within us. In this story Jesus not only suggests that he is indeed the Living Water, but that he can show us a source of Living Water within ourselves. He can activate those spiritual depths that will rise up into a spring of deep inner peace and everlasting life. That source of thirst quenching spiritual nourishment is found in that place in our souls that was created in the image and likeness of God. It can sustain and nurture us in the best and worst of times, this hidden source of living water. You know, all of nature depends upon such hidden resources to sustain life. Trees and flowers and plants send their roots down deep into the earth to draw up water and minerals hidden far below. Underneath so much of the earth are caves and hidden well springs of water, which nourish living things in unseen ways. That is what Jesus offers to the Samaritan woman at the well, and to us.

So after Jesus talks with this woman awhile, the disciples return. They had gone off to buy food in town, and when they come back to Jacob’s well, they are astonished to find their beloved teacher talking to such a disreputable person. They cannot ask her to leave, they cannot ask him why he is speaking to her, but as The Message tells us, “No one said what they were thinking, but their faces showed it.” She senses their deep disapproval, and so she leaves quickly, in fact she is so flustered that she forgets to take her water pot with her and leaves it behind. This poor woman who has been battered by life, judged and condemned, experiences yet another rejection from the disapproving disciples. But she does not go away dejected. She goes off to tell everyone in the nearby town of this astonishing encounter with a man who knew everything she ever did. She leaves to proclaim this astonishing event, asking if this could indeed be the Messiah they have awaited for so long. The people in town are curious, those scorned Samaritans who have been hated by Jews for generations. They decided to go and see for themselves if this man is really sincere and if his love can actually embrace those he should hate.

Jesus offers to anyone with ears to hear and eyes to see this living water, but he will not force anyone to drink it. There is no coercion or pressure in the gift he offers, simply an invitation. It is up to people in every age to decide whether or not they will take a long refreshing drink that will connect them to a source of refreshment and peace.

Nearly every day we walk our dog Lucy around our neighborhood, this very neighborhood. We try to do it in the evenings, when it's cool, but sometimes we do it in the heat of the day if we have things going on at night. After about 15 minutes of walking in the heat, Lucy begins to look very, very thirsty. She starts wagging her tongue and just looking at her makes me thirsty! Sometimes, when she is like that, we will bring her right up to a ditch of flowing water, stop and wait for her, and yet she will not drink. Her tongue is hanging out heart racing, but she will not drink. It's crazy, and I am tempted to kneel down in the ditch and start drinking myself, just to show her what to do. You can indeed lead a collie to water, but.....

I think we are all a little bit like Lucy. There is a source of living water right in front of us which can quench our inner thirst. It is endless and life giving and transforming. Just like the clean water that flows for the very first time to a poor village in rural Honduras that we heard about earlier in our worship service today. It is a gift that changes everything. And yet we hesitate, and fail to avail ourselves of this living water.

The story of the woman at the well is our story too. This story of people who walk around carrying a lot of unnecessary baggage day after day. This story of a man who has been waiting for us, and who mysteriously knows everything we have ever done, and loves us just the same. He offers all of us a source of freedom, refreshment, welling up into eternal life. May we have the good sense to drink from this living water as often as we can.

Let us pray.....

Refreshing God: You offer us a source of living water that has the ability to help, heal, and transform our lives. Help us to receive this nourishment that comes from you alone and is the source of our life—a wellspring that never runs dry. Amen.

