

Covenant Word

Coming to the Watering Hole

Romans 5:1-11, John 4:5-30, 39-42

A Message by
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Sunday
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The television comedy series, “Cheers,” was a favorite of mine. Set in Boston, this local neighborhood bar, or watering hole, became the place to meet and greet. Sam, the bartender, usually had some life lesson to learn. Frazier, the local psychiatrist could never get his own relationships right but he felt free to give counsel to others. Cliff was a post man who delivered

more misinformation than mail, and Norm was the good-hearted comedian. The door would open,

and as he walked in, everything would pause just long enough for all to shout in greeting, “Norm!” Invariably someone would ask, “So, how’s your day been?” And he would reply with quips like: “It’s a dog eat dog world, and I’m wearin’ MilkBone underwear!”

Now I would suggest to you that this bar was more than just a place at which to stop for a “quick drink” before going home. It was the place to greet and be greeted by friends. It was the place to hear the latest news and have others in close enough proximity and spirit to talk through and digest the news. It was the place where “everybody knew your name.”

This setting, as foreign and distant as it may seem in geography and time, is what we see re-enacted in our gospel lesson for today. Jacob’s well was the gathering place. The well would have had a capstone of about 5 feet wide across the well opening. In the center of the 20 inch thick capstone would have been a hole large enough for a collapsible leather bucket to drop through to the water beneath. The capstone kept dirt from blowing into the well; it prevented children from falling into its dangerous depths; it gave a working surface upon which to work as water was transferred from bucket to jar or leather traveling bag; and it gave a place to sit as the folks visited OR it gave a weary traveler a place to catch his breath, as is true for our story today. (Kenneth Bailey, Jesus Through Middle

Eastern Eyes)

Middle Eastern village women would come to retrieve water early in the morning or just before sundown in order to avoid the heat of the day. To insure safety, they would come as a group. Furthermore, once the jars were full, they were heavy and the women would need one another to assist in lifting the full jars onto their heads. All the while, they could talk—talk about their children and their husbands; the weather; new recipes and remedies for illnesses; who in their community were lingering close to death and who would soon give birth. They talked about the “stuff” of life as they found community with one another.

Knowing this creates a background upon which to understand the isolation and loneliness of a woman who comes during the noonday hour to draw her water from the well alone. We are quick to assume that she is a woman of loose morals especially when later in the story we find out that she has had a series of husbands. What we fail to remember, and of which her presence reminds the locals who use the same watering hole, is that she may not

have devoured her husband after husband, as much as she has been devoured by a social system that, for whatever reason, has passed her from

man to man to man until she no longer has even the dignity of marriage. (Thomas Long, “Words, Words, Words,” Whispering the Lyrics) So to walk with her to the well, to share the simple news of each day, to just know her name would personalize her dilemma and create within us feelings of responsibility. In other words that we should do something to help: rouse the local politicians to intervene or, at least, find a United Way agency to lend support and encouragement. But, as we all know, that sort of involvement can get messy. It involves too much red tape. It would force us to explain our actions of conviction to our children and friends and family. It is just easier not to get involved, not to know her name and to let her continue to go to the well all alone.

Now Middle Eastern wells do not have buckets attached to them. Each traveling group usually had a soft leather bucket that was easily rolled up for transport. Surely Jesus and his disciples had such a bucket for their journeys. So did the disciples take it with them into the city or did Jesus purposefully leave it stashed away so that he could engage whoever came to the well in conversation? By deliberately sitting on the well without a bucket, Jesus strategically placed himself to be in need of whoever happened to appear with the necessary provisions.

On seeing the woman approach the well, Jesus,



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according to society's dictums, was expected to courteously withdraw to a distance of at least twenty feet, indicating that it was both safe and culturally appropriate for her to approach the well. Jesus did not move, however, and she decides to come to the well anyway. (Bailey)

The story, therefore, begins in hard, cold silence. She who came to the well was a Samaritan; he who rested at the well was a Jew. She who came to the well was a woman;

he who rested at the well was a man. Centuries of cultural hatred, prejudice and assumptions automatically erected a wall between them through which no words were allowed to pass. (Long) So it is amazing to watch grace work in a very simple way. All Jesus does is ask for a drink of water and the longest recorded conversation between Jesus and any one else in all of scripture takes place. The woman, longing for community, and Jesus, willing to make deep connections, talk of politics, faith, and sin. When Jesus gets too pointed, she changes the subject. Jesus, however, will not allow her to retreat. When she steps back, he steps toward her. When she steps out of the light, he steps into it. When she becomes determined to show him less of herself, he shows her more of himself until he reveals the complete truth about himself. She says, "I know that Messiah is coming." And Jesus replies, "I am he." (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Reflections on the Lectionary," The Christian Century, Feb. 12, 2008)

It is the first time Jesus has confessed this to another living soul. It is a moment of complete disclosure. The Messiah, the Son of God, stands face to face with this Samaritan woman in the bright light of the noonday sun and in that moment, all the rules, taboos, and history that serve to separate them fall forgotten to the ground. (B.B. Taylor)

It is into this awkwardly intimate moment that the disciples return. They bring the worldly reality back with them that Jews and Samaritans don't mix; that men and women do not converse in public. What in the world is Jesus up to this time, they must have asked one another on their approach?

Is it any wonder that the woman is so unnerved by their appearance—catching her respectfully exposed for possible the first time in her life—that she leaves her jar at the well? OR could it be that she is so struck by new purpose and energy that she leaves the jar and returns to the village to be as bold as to tell the villagers, "Come and see! He has told me everything I ever did! Could it be the Messiah?"

And so they come. Her genuineness and their personal thirst for God was greater than their opinion of her and their bias that women should not speak to men. They gather as a true community—no more outsiders; no more insiders. They gather at the watering hole to drink the living water that Jesus offers. Scripture says that Jesus stayed with them for two days and that many became believers having heard for themselves that Jesus was the Savior of the world.

It seems to me that Baptist Church of the Covenant sits in a prime location to be a watering hole. We personally know this to be true because as we go through the paces of our week, we find that we often yearn for a drink of living water. We come

here, and we feel it well up inside of us from the moment we walk into these doors. We quench our spiritual thirst with the worship experiences, Bible studies and especially with the fellowship.

From the knocks on our doors to the people who pass by on their way to work, however, we realize that there are many in our community who bring empty jars

that need filling and some whose jars are so full to the brim with everything else in the world, they cannot figure out why they are still so thirsty. Jesus' presence reminds us to go, get them, and bring them to Him for a drink of living water.

While we faithfully participate in many ministries, with the purchase of the Cat Haven property, we currently find ourselves with an opportunity to uncover how we might drill for deeper water. While the Council on Mission has had a preliminary discussion, I will be asking them to lead us in a discernment process so that we can study, pray, research, and develop the most effective ministry in which to invest ourselves, our time, our talents, and our money. This process will raise questions similar to the ones asked by the Samaritan woman and others who came to Jesus searching for direction. Questions like: What is the greatest need in our community?

What have downtown churches done in other cities?

Who do we target?

How do we partner with the city of Birmingham and other agencies?

What legal ramifications will we inherit?

What sort of space is involved?

Which ministry strikes at our greatest desire for involvement?

How do we come to consensus on which ministry will receive our primary focus?

Is our block the best location, in other words, do the physical plants of church and ministry center have to be adjoined?

As we well know, discussions of this sort can drag on for years, but guess what? We paid almost \$60,000 on the principal of the mortgage this week. The renter's leases will run out in a little over two years. We need to be making some decisions, so that we are ready with a plan for action in 2010! To use a term that has become near and dear to us, we have no reason to delay, because the future is now!

This will require us to follow the example of the Samaritan woman and not the disciples. These disciples of Jesus are still so stuck in their cultural biases that they cannot understand what is happening at the well. Because the woman experiences complete acceptance, probably for the first time in her life, she realizes that God's favor and blessing go beyond cultural boundaries and is vibrantly present in places like Samaria. We must, therefore, be different sorts of disciples, willing to go to the most unlikely watering holes, in order to offer a drink of

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living water.

This recently happened to Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor. Several years ago, she moved, with her husband, Ed, to a rural area of Georgia. When they built their home, they decided to run its water off of a well on the property. Wanting to be ecologically responsible, they only drilled 27 feet deep. It has worked beautifully, supplying them with only top water, until the drought began this past summer. So in order to insure that they have water to drink in their home, Barbara has begun to make weekly trips to the Laundromat in town. The first time she went, she took three loads of laundry and fifteen quarters, remembering such trips from college days. She crammed all of her whites into the Maxi-Load washer. Next to the coin slot was the red number

18. She wondered

what it could mean.

Did the wash cycle

take 18 minutes?

Was this the 18th

washer in the

Laundromat?

Gradually, it occurred

to her that the water

would not start

flowing until 18 quarters were put into the slot! (Barbara Brown

Taylor, "Faith Matters: When the Well Runs Dry," *Christian*

Century, February 26, 2008)

She continues: Now I show up with pockets full of heavy metal. I can do three loads of laundry in just under an hour. While I am waiting, I can also watch children playing under the folding tables while their mothers catch up on the news. I can joke with the guy who does not know the first thing about how to fold a fitted sheet. I can flirt with the little Latina girl who holds the door for me when I take my clothes back to my car, although our eye contact is the only common language we have.

When I first started showing up, some of the regulars could not figure out what someone like me was doing there. The woman who looks after the place started fishing by asking me where I lived. I told her, and she said she had seen a lot of new people since the drought. I could recognize most of them myself. One woman stuck around just long enough for the wash cycle, telling her pretty daughter to sit still and not touch anything. Then she took her wet clothes back to her car to dry in her dryer at home.

Some of my friends feel sorry for me because I have to go to the Laundromat, but I tell them not to. Not having enough water at home has brought me into contact with people who do not have enough of other things at home, and I am enjoying their company. Every week now, I leave my place of private plenty, to go to the common watering hole in town... I never really thought about it before, but scarcity evokes community.

Oh my friends, how will we match our places of private plenty to the places of scarcity? How will scarcity build community? My hope...my prayer...is that we will allow the living waters of Jesus to spring up in us as individuals and as the body of Christ so that others may be welcomed into and valued by the community that gathers at this watering hole. That being the case: **<hold up bottle of water>** "Cheers...for our history!" "Salute...to the future!" "Down the hatch!" and "Here, here! ... For those willing to share the good news in Samaria, to our

neighbors wherever we may find them, and on this corner of the Kingdom known as Baptist Church of the Covenant!"

Let us pray:

Oh Lord, we are grateful for the witnessing presence of Baptist Church of the Covenant in our lives, for when our wells run dry, we encounter Your loving Presence and find that our hope is renewed, our joy is restored, and our spirits refreshed. Give us a vision for the future so that as You well up within us, our overflow will continue to grow a community that is faithful to love one another even as You have loved us.

Work with us, Lord, to be accepting of those whose

circumstances cause them to come to this well at inopportune

times in order to hide

their shame or

embarrassment. Keep

us from shying away

from those who stand in

the bright sunlight,

boldly announcing their

presence among us. Do

not allow contentment

to settle over us as we

gather and chat and aid those whom we have come to know at this gathering place. Rather, keep us alive to the possibilities of how grace can powerfully work through the simplest of questions or smallest acts of kindness...like sharing a cup of water with those who are thirsty.

We look to you, as well, O God to satisfy our thirst for Your Holy Presence within us. Accept our commitments to love You, worship You, and to seek after Your Kingdom here on earth.

For we make this prayer in the name of Jesus, who continues to tell us everything we ever did,

Amen.