

The Holy Gospel according to John, the 4th chapter. Glory to you, O God. Please go ahead and have a seat. I'm going to start with a bit of a run up to our reading, beginning with verse 1.

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John" —although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the

Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace from God our Parent and through our Savior Jesus who is the Christ.

Depending on which study you look at, somewhere between 40 to 75 percent of Americans are chronically dehydrated. I'm not a doctor, but I don't have much trouble believing in these statistics, especially in winter. I

know I haven't been drinking enough water, because I get dry eyes and headaches and even nosebleeds. And, maybe this is true for you too, the funny thing is that I don't even recognize that I'm thirsty. It's a fairly widespread phenomenon that as we grow up, we learn to shake off scrapes and bruises, and then minor aches and pains, and soon even helpful information from our bodies such as hunger and thirst. So doctors have to remind us to drink water even when we don't know we're thirsty.

Likewise, I think, we shrug off other things we need because we think they're inconvenient, or unattainable. When Jesus proclaimed a few weeks ago in the beatitudes, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled" we have, or at least I have, a fuzzy sense at best how that pertains to me. Am I thirsty? I have no idea.

So it's an interesting interchange, this long conversation between Jesus and the unnamed woman. As we saw in the first reading, in a desert climate, being unaware of your thirst can be a death sentence. It's no surprise that Jesus immediately asks for what he needs, as a hot, dusty traveler through a foreign land. He seems to ignore all the social conventions about whom he is allowed to talk to (a woman, a Samaritan), and for her part, the woman also does not seem to shrink from this challenging conversation. Does she know she is thirsty?

To refresh, just last week comes what is probably the most famous verse in the entire Bible: "For God so loved the world he gave his only Son that whoever believes might not perish but have eternal life." So, when Jesus leaves to go back to Galilee through Samaria, he is showing his disciples exactly *the world* that God loves: not one that ends at the borders of Judea, or the United States, or the global north, but a love that extends to every corner of the universe. And for all the attention John 3:16 receives, we should also remember verse 17: "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

You'll also remember that Samaritans and Jews are close cousins—maybe the best equivalent for us would be Lutherans and Catholics—they're close cousins whose public feud resulted in a *complete* break. In the year 129 BCE, which would have been recent history in Jesus' time, the Jewish High Priest destroyed the Samaritan capital city of Shechem, and burned their

temple on Mt. Gerazim to the ground. Feelings between the two groups were inflamed, to say the least. When the woman says “our ancestors worshiped on this mountain,” the unspoken part of her message is “until your ancestors destroyed our place of worship.”

Is she thirsty for vindication? Respect? Recognition that Samaritans have their own legitimate and longstanding relationship to the one God? Whoever this guy at the well is, she’s not going to let him have the upper hand.

Some important background for you to know is that wells were the ancient literary equivalent to a rom-com meet-cute. A contemporary audience would have wondered: is this sassy conversation going to lead to fireworks or firearms? (Honesty compels me to tell you neither had been invented yet.)

But then an amazing thing happens. United by thirst, Jesus and the woman get past their immediate differences and have the longest conversation Jesus is recorded to have had with *anyone*. He treats her concerns as legitimate and worthy of an answer. Because it turns out that everyone gets thirsty sooner or later. Everyone needs water to live.

Lutheran pastor Bill Flippin notes that this thirst sort of evens the playing field, regardless that she is a woman, regardless that he comes from an oppositional religious tradition, regardless of her unhappy past.

Is she thirsty for understanding? Has she been ignoring her thirst for so long she doesn’t recognize its signs? The text doesn’t tell us if she has been widowed, if she is divorced, whether she has had any say at all in her marital status.

We do not see Jesus moralizing about her status, nor does he “forgive” any supposed sin. What he does do is to show his understanding of a life that, whatever its circumstances have been, has certainly not met her hopes and dreams. He sees her, and knows her for the deeply wounded human that she is.

I’m guessing that a few of us in this room can relate. Whether in big ways or in small ones, life has sometimes disappointed us. Sometimes we have disappointed ourselves. We need to be seen just as much as we need water. We need someone who can hold all of who we are, our gifts and our

challenges, our virtues and our foibles, and stay in the conversation with us.

Maybe you've learned to shrug off this thirst; maybe you don't even recognize when you're thirsty.

And then, after telling the woman "everything she had ever done," Jesus also reveals himself to her, claiming, for the first and only time in the Gospel of John, the title of Messiah: "I am he who is speaking to you."

Barbara Brown Taylor describes the scene this way:

"By telling the woman who she is, Jesus shows her who he is. By confirming her true identity, he reveals his own, and that is how it still happens. The Messiah is the one in whose presence you know who you really are—the good and bad of it, the all of it, the hope in it."¹

The Messiah is the one in whose presence we know who we really are. There is no hiding here, no hiding the parts of ourselves or the parts of our lives that we would just as soon forget. But the hope, the hope and the promise is that through this One we can be reconciled to God. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world." Every corner of the universe—even the human heart.

And isn't that what each of us is thirsty for? That someone would look deep into our souls, "knowing everything we have ever done" and not reject us, but rather promise us "water gushing up to eternal life"? Isn't that worth leaving behind your water jar—and every coping mechanism that has ever failed you—to follow Jesus?

We are invited, encouraged, to drink deeply from this well of grace and forgiveness, spirit and truth. Whether or not you feel thirsty. Amen.