

Living Water

Preached on The Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity

Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ

Oct. 24, 2021

Text: Jn. 4: 46-54

The Gospel text for today is framed by two very different stories in John's Gospel. This account of a nobleman coming to Jesus and interceding for his dying child is contained in the last 9 verses of Chapter 4. It is a complete story in itself, and except for the fact that it is clearly the next event in a travel account of Jesus' ministry, it could have been placed anywhere. There are 54 verses in Chapter 4 all told, and the first 45 verses are given over to the account of Jesus conversation with a woman at Jacob's well. Interestingly, this is the longest one-on-one exchange between Jesus and anyone that is recorded in the New Testament. She was "a woman of Samaria." Let's get our bearings by looking first at that meeting.

Jesus had been in Jerusalem where he had a long theological conversation with Nicodemus who was identified as a "ruler of the Jews." It was pretty much a one-sided conversation, with Nicodemus not coming off all that well. At this point Jesus attracted the attention—and suspicion—of the Pharisees. Shortly after that he left Jerusalem for Galilee. He was traveling through Samaria when he and his disciples came upon a well and Jesus, tired from the journey, sent his men into a neighboring village to find food. He found a spot of ground and sat down next to the well, known to be Jacob's Well. He was resting his weary body and all he needed was a drink of water. But he had no rope or pail to draw water from the well.

And then a woman from the village came to draw water. According to the text, it was high noon, an odd time of day to come after water. But the woman had her reasons. In all likelihood she had come at this time to avoid the women of her village. Given what we learn of this woman, she was probably shunned by the respectable, well brought-up folk of the village. She was a disgrace; and her behavior was such that no one wanted anything to do with her—except, of course, those who wanted to use her. That much she had learned.

This stranger, obviously a Jew, surprised her. Note the posture. Jesus is resting on the ground next to the well. She is standing. Jesus had to be looking up to her when he said "Give me a drink." She began chatting with him in a somewhat playful, familiar, even skillful manner. Later, the discussion took a decidedly theological turn. Frankly, Jesus seems to have been enjoying this conversation. He made promises to her, something about "living water." That was not the first time a man had made promises to her. She had good reason to be skeptical.

But here he is, this Jew, making a very big promise about Living Water. In fact, the original audience of this Gospel could not help but to see the irony here. The conversation

Jesus is having with this non-Jewish woman is exactly the same conversation he was just having with Nicodemus, “a ruler of the Jews.” But here there is far more theological progress made. Nicodemus would have to wait for what this woman was about to receive.

Jesus told her that if she would merely ask him, then God Almighty would fill her life with true, permanent happiness. He then revealed to her that she has had five “husbands” and is now with a man to whom she was not married. She immediately realized she was in the presence of a prophet. At this point Jesus steers the conversation away from who does worship “right,” and instead says “the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeketh such to worship him.” (4:23) She responds “I know that Messiah is coming and when he does he will show us all things.” (25) And then Jesus said to her: “I who speak to you am he.”

It is difficult to find another place in the New Testament where Jesus declared his messianic identity so straightforwardly. Not to Nicodemus; not even to his own disciples. The woman believed him. And she acted on her belief so quickly that she dropped her pail and ran into the village and told everyone about Jesus. Many Samaritans in that village believed on him that day as the Messiah. He and his disciples stayed in that non-Jewish city for two days, and on the third day he returned to Cana of Galilee, where he had turned the water in the wine. It is here that a nobleman of the city of Capernaum, some 15 miles away, came to Jesus, interceding for his dying child.

“The nobleman saith unto him, Sir, come down ere my child die. Jesus saith unto him, Go thy way; thy son liveth. And the man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him...”

So we have two accounts of non-Jews displaying faith in the Lord Jesus. The first is an unlikely follower. If you were going to pick someone to serve as a good example to “market” Christianity in the first century, you wouldn’t choose the woman at the well. First, she is a woman, then a Samaritan, and finally an immoral one at that. She already has three strikes against her. Yet her new and barely formed faith is front and center in this story. We are told that many in the town believed in Jesus because of her testimony “He told me all that I ever did.” From our vantage point, this wouldn’t seem to be enough for the villagers to drop what they were doing and check it out. Why would the testimony of this wanton woman, scorned by her town, initiate belief? But somehow her faith burst forth from her and others couldn’t help investigating this stranger at the well. She was truly an early disciple.

The nobleman obviously had a quite different story. He was a man of power and privilege, belonging to the stratum of society often least likely to respond favorably to the message of Jesus. Yet here he is, imploring the Lord on behalf of his son, who was at the point of death. He doesn’t have a Christian’s faith. He doesn’t realize he is speaking with the *Logos* through whom all things were made. All he knows is that Jesus has renown as a miracle worker. So he makes the journey from Capernaum—hardly a casual stroll—and begs Jesus to come there and heal his son. He endures Jesus’s rebuke about his requiring

“signs and wonders,” continuing to plead for mercy. Jesus tells him “Go thy way; thy son liveth.” And the man believed Jesus and went his way. He met his servants before he got home and learned that his son’s fever had broken the day before, in the hour when Jesus had said “thy son liveth.” He then became a believer, he and his entire household.

We read in the first chapter of John that Jesus “came unto his own and his own received him not, but as many as received him, as many as believed on his name, he gave power to become children of God.” Remember that today’s Gospel account of the healing of the official’s child is framed by two very different stories. In fact, we can go further and put all of Chapter 4 together: the account of the woman at the well and the healing of the nobleman’s son, neither of them Jews, are nestled between accounts of Jesus’ dealings with faithless Jews in Jerusalem. In the third chapter, we see his long conversation with Nicodemus, where the latter reveals his lack of faith and understanding.

Immediately after the healing of the nobleman’s son, we have another healing at the opening of chapter 5, again in Jerusalem. A man who had been lame for 38 years hoped for healing in the pool called Beth ezda, but was never able to enter before someone else got there first. Jesus healed him, and the man took up his pallet, and began walking. He was reprimanded shortly after for carrying his pallet on the Sabbath, and was asked who healed him. When Jesus was finally identified as the healer, John tells us that the Jews from this time on wished to destroy him. How different is this account than those in chapter 4! But where the rulers of Israel rejected Jesus, the woman at the well and the nobleman, neither one a Jew, believed on the name of Jesus. Both of them believed in the Lord and this bore fruit.

One wonders if the church today is more like these two early believers, or more like the religious establishment that rejected Jesus. Do we come to God aware of our spiritual poverty, knowing that we have no claim on his mercy? Or do we come assured that God backs our self-serving agendas 100%? It seems more like the latter. How often do church bodies repent of their worldliness, or even hint that repentance might be called for? Churches in the West are eaten up with idolatry, but they don’t repent of this—they sanctify it. Hence, we have come to believe there is no tension between God’s Kingdom and man’s. Though the charitable outreach of many churches is commendable, we have easily swallowed the complete privatization of the Faith, and so few of us chafe at the shrinking of the Church’s mission to one of support—therapeutically conceived—for the emotional refreshment of religious consumers. And it goes without saying that such a church can’t really challenge its members’ worldly allegiances. How could it? For that would require Her to recover a sense of a cosmic mission to which all else is subordinate. Let’s hope we, Her more comfortable members, wake up to our calling before it’s too late and repent of our presumption. If not, we may hear Jesus, sadly, telling us “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it.” (Matt. 21:43)

In the Name...