

Never Thirst Again

John 4:1-42

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Jesus leaves Judea and goes to Galilee. He *had* to go through Samaria. Now, he could have gone around Samaria. Most Jews did in order to avoid contact with the Samaritans whom they regarded as impure. Possibly Galileans had less of a problem going through Samaria (Michael Card, *John: The Gospel of Wisdom* 68). But Jesus needs to go through Samaria because he wants to share the good news of the kingdom—even in Samaria. He had a passion to share the good news and to introduce people to new life.

Jesus is our model for sharing faith with people, for helping them hear the good news and see what God offers, and for responding to God and receiving new life. Faith-sharing, witnessing, personal evangelism—all are ways of describing this exciting ministry that God calls all Christians to take part in. Being invitational and showing hospitality are ways the whole church shares in the ministry of evangelism.

Inviting someone to church is different from inviting them to Christ—although it can be part of the process. What if, when you invite a friend to church, the conversation turns to why you attend church at all and what it means to you? There's an opportunity to share your story and invite people to discover for themselves what it means to know and love and worship God in the company of other believers. What if, when they come to Sunday School and worship, they hear the gospel for themselves and respond to it?

You may recall the woman who was explaining how another woman led her to Christ. She said, "That dear friend built a bridge from her heart to mine, and Jesus walked across that bridge into my life." That's a great picture of Christian witness.

Of course a bridge is no good if it doesn't reach both sides of the creek. We need to know not only the gospel message, but also how to relate it to people in ways they can understand and respond to. That's an area where I continue to grow. I keep looking for ways to connect the content of Christian faith with real life. There's no one-size-fits-all method of sharing the good news.

Jesus dealt with people as individuals. Certainly you can find some common themes and approaches in his various dealings with people. But he

also knew how to read a person's particular need and address it. Remember we saw last week that Jesus "knew what was in everyone" (John 2:25). He knew which aspect of his message would best minister to a person at a particular time and place.

The scene where he visits with the Samaritan woman at the well is one example of how Jesus approached an individual. Compare how Jesus dealt with this woman and how he dealt with Nicodemus in chapter 3. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. The woman meets Jesus at noon. Nicodemus was a respected member of the Jewish establishment. The woman was not only a Samaritan, but she was an outcast with no social status among her own people. Nicodemus represents a group of people whose believing in Jesus was lacking in some way. By the end of her conversation with Jesus, the woman's faith in Jesus has grown. Nicodemus sort of fades from the scene in chapter 3. The woman returns to her town and tells people about Jesus in such a way that they come to believe in him themselves.

A classic book about personal faith-sharing or witnessing is Rebecca Pippert's *Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World*. Writing out of her experience as a campus minister, she says:

Jesus commands us to go and then preach, not to preach and then leave. We are not to shout the gospel from a safe and respectable distance, and remain detached. We must open our lives and let people see that we too laugh and hurt and cry. If Jesus left all of heaven and glory to become one of us, shouldn't we at least be willing to leave our dorm room or Bible study circle to reach out to a friend?

God made us human. He is therefore interested in every aspect of our humanness. We dare not limit him to Bible studies and discussions with Christians. He created life and he desires to be glorified in the totality of all that adds up to life. And his power and presence will come crashing through to the world as we let him live fully in every aspect of our lives. (34)

Jesus and the disciples came to a town called Sychar in Samaria. The town well was one that Jacob had dug ages ago. Jesus was tired from his journey. So

he sat down by the well while his disciples went into town to buy some food. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water from the well. It was unusual for her to be there at noon. That chore was usually done in the cool of the day. Jesus did something unusual as well. He asked her for a drink. Some Jewish rabbis taught that men shouldn't speak to women, not even their wives, in public. And, not only was she a woman, she was a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans typically had nothing to do with each other. Jesus asked her for a drink, so he would have to drink from her water jar. But most Jews wouldn't use vessels and utensils that Samaritans had used. Jesus would use a Samaritan's cup.

He didn't first offer her mercy, but he asked her to show him mercy. He gave her an opportunity to help him and showed that her help was wanted and valuable.

When we were looking at the first chapter of John we saw that Jesus is full of "grace and truth." That phrase echoes what the Lord told Moses on the mountain: the LORD abounds in "love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6). The word for love there is *hesed*. Michael Card has written a whole book about the idea of *hesed*. It's almost impossible to translate into English, but it usually comes across as lovingkindness, steadfast love, mercy, or kindness.

Card tells a story about a time when one of his family members had an unexpected stay in the hospital. Michael went to the store to buy some things they might need. As he got into the checkout line, there was a woman ahead of him with as many items in her hands as he had. She smiled and said, "Why don't you go ahead of me."

"Oh, I couldn't do that," I said. "My mother didn't raise me to break in line, and what's more I was always taught to let girls go first," I said jokingly, but also kind of serious.

She patiently smiled, but insisted again that I go ahead: "I have some questions, and I don't want you to have to wait on me."

"But I would be glad to wait," I said, still trying to be considerate, kind, my mother's son, and so on.

Then she said something that suddenly brought tears to my eyes. There are tears in my eyes at this moment as I write these words, though I'm not sure I completely understand why.

"Why won't you let me be kind to you?" she said.

Why wouldn't I? In my mind, apparently kindness counted only when I did it for someone else. In that small encounter I learned a new lesson. If you truly love hesed as Micah 6:8 says, you should love having it shown to you as much as showing it to others. (*Inexpressible* 118-19)

I learned a similar lesson last week. At funerals, I'm usually the one giving care, showing compassion, and so forth. But I was on the receiving end of all that after Dad died. And I'm grateful for all the concern and compassion that were shown to my family and me.

Jesus offers to let the woman at the well be kind to him. He connects with her by letting her help be appreciated.

The woman recognized that Jesus had broken barriers of culture, race and religion. She reacts to that: "You're a Jew and I'm a Samaritan. How can you ask me for a drink?"

Jesus answers her: "If you knew the gift of God and who is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." If she'll recognize who's speaking to her, she'll ask him for living water. "Living" water is running water, like from a spring. It's better than standing water in a cistern, like this well.

The woman misunderstands Jesus. She's thinking about physical water. He's using water as an image of life. She raises an objection based on her misunderstanding: "Sir, you don't have a bucket or a rope and the well is deep. Where do you get this living water? Are you greater than our Father Jacob who gave us this well?"

Jesus is indeed greater than Father Jacob. Remember, he fulfills Jacob's dream of a ladder from heaven to earth. Jesus is where heaven and earth meet. His answer points out her misunderstanding and expands on what he can give: "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

He's showing her that the life that he can give is refreshing and thrilling. She's being drawn in. She wants to accept Jesus' offer. But again she misunderstands. Now she expresses perhaps a magical view of Jesus' words: "Sir, give me this water so that I may never be thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." How wonderful to have your own personal supply of water and not have to depend on this well—not have to walk all this way and carry water back home—not have to face the loneliness of coming here by myself. "Please, sir, give me that water!"

What if we lived in a place where clean water wasn't readily available? What if we had to walk to a well outside town to get the water we need each day? We'd jump at an offer of living water that makes us never thirst again. But Jesus isn't talking about just physical water, is he?

Have you ever been really thirsty? Working in the heat and not taking a break? Running or working out. We hear stories about people stranded in the desert or on the ocean with no water to drink. That's a picture of thirst. Are we that thirsty, that desperate, for God?

This Samaritan woman was that thirsty. And she was beginning to realize how thirsty she really was. Later, at a festival in Jerusalem, Jesus will announce that he will give living water to anyone who's thirsty and comes to him. There the living water is defined as the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God, the living presence of God, is like water to quench the thirst of our deepest needs.

On the cross, Jesus will say, "I thirst." Jesus knows what it is to be parched and dry physically— and spiritually, as he absorbs our sin and evil. He suffers all it can do to him. But at the same time, he fulfills the Scriptures and completes the work of salvation. The one who thirsts on the cross becomes the fountain of life for us.

The woman at the well doesn't know any of that yet. She's still trying to understand this strange man who's speaking to her. She's curious about him and wants to hear more. She's beginning to recognize her spiritual thirst. But she also has a secret she doesn't want him to know about her.

When she asks Jesus to give her the magic water that makes her not thirst again, he replies, "Go, get your husband and come back here." Where'd that come from? Jesus has touched on a sore place in the woman's life. How could he know her secret? She may have hoped that he just assumed she was married

and wanted to include her husband in the gift of living water. But still she gets defensive and speaks a half-truth: "I have no husband."

But Jesus did know her secret. Jesus knows all people and knows what's in each person (John 2:24, 25). He says, "You're right. You've had five husbands and the man you now have is not your husband. What you've said is true."

Jesus isn't embarrassed to point to her sin and her brokenness. He does it graciously yet firmly. The gospel makes moral claims. The good news of God's grace and salvation in Jesus doesn't contradict God's law. It fulfills it. If we're to receive new life from Jesus, repentance is required.

But there may be more here. Traditionally, this woman has been portrayed as an adulteress, maybe even a prostitute. But the text doesn't say that. She's been married five times. Women didn't have the right to divorce in that culture, but men did. Maybe she's been dumped five times. Or, widowed five times. Either way, that's a lot of heartbreak and grief. And now she's with a man who isn't even bothering to marry her. Or maybe she just can't stand to go through being married again.

After Jesus shows that he knows her and her history, she says, "Sir, I can see that you are a prophet." Then she raises another difficulty. It's a question she no doubt really wondered about. But it's also something of a smokescreen. She raises a religious question. The Samaritans said that Mt. Gerizim in Samaria was the place to worship. The Jews said Jerusalem was. Who was right?

Jesus avoids getting tangled up in this religious argument. That's a good lesson for us. Stick to the basic gospel. Whether the woman's question was an evasion or not, Jesus deals with it succinctly and brings her back to the question of himself and what she's going to do about it. "A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

Note that God the Father is *seeking* worshipers. God seeks people. God is searching for the lost. God is looking for people to know and adore him.

The woman reaches for her last defense. She tries to put off a decision. "I know that Messiah is coming and he will explain everything to us."

Jesus now declares, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he." Jesus shares with this Samaritan woman what he hasn't told his fellow Jews. He clearly states his identity. She says she's waiting for Messiah. He says, "Wait no more. I am

speaks to you." The words "I am" here may refer to God's revealing his name to Moses at the burning bush. Speaking with the authority of God, Jesus tells this woman who he is.

The disciples now return and are surprised to find Jesus talking with a woman, but they don't ask him about it.

The woman leaves her water jar. Does she mean for Jesus to be able to get a drink? Is she so excited about knowing Jesus that she forgets? Does this symbolize that she's received living water? She goes back to town and tells the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" Her faith is not very deep or well formulated. But it's enough. Over the course of this conversation, she's gone from not knowing anything about Jesus to believing that he's the Chosen One and receiving living water—the life of God—from him to telling others about him.

Where are you in that process? Have you found in Jesus what you really need to quench the thirst in your soul? Is there someone who needs to hear from you the invitation to "come and see" Jesus?