Spiritual Thirst

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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John 4:3-14

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All of us have longings. Yet, our deepest longing is for God.

Michael Jordan is arguably the greatest basketball player who ever lived. During his professional career, he led the NBA in scoring average six times, was voted MVP five times, won the NBA title six times and was selected to the All-Star team 14 times.

He’s been retired now for 15 years. Today, Michael manages a billion-dollar industry called The Jordan Brand. He owns a professional basketball team in Charlotte. He still does endorsements and plays a lot of golf. But he would give it all back for the chance to play basketball again. In his induction speech into the NBA Hall of Fame, he spoke of basketball as his refuge. “It’s the place where I go to find comfort and peace.” His identity and self-esteem are so tied to the game that he can’t stay away from it. Without it, he feels adrift, even restless. He wondered in an interview recently, “How can I find peace away from the game of basketball?”

Maybe someone can arrange for me to have a private audience with Michael, so I can tell him how to find peace away from basketball. Our deepest longing is for God.

St. Augustine wrote in the opening paragraph of his spiritual autobiography entitled Confessions, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” Our deepest longing is for God.

The woman in our story comes to a well to draw water, but Jesus offers her living water. He recognizes her deep longing for God.

We’re told at the outset of our story that “Jesus had to go through Samaria” (4:4). There are two routes to take if you want to go from Judea in the south where Jesus is staying to Galilee in the north. The longer route is through the Jordan River Valley that observant Jews would routinely travel. The more direct route, through Samaria, is what Jesus takes. It’s not a geographical necessity that compels Jesus to travel through Samaria; rather it’s a divine necessity. The Greek word used in this sentence (dei) expresses God’s plan and will for Jesus to go there. There’s someone Jesus had to see in Samaria. It’s a divine appointment, you might say.

Jesus arrives at Jacob’s well near Sychar at the precise moment a Samaritan woman comes to draw water. “Will you give me a drink?” he asks (4:7).
She reacts with understandable surprise: “You’re a Jew and I’m a Samaritan. How can you ask me for a drink?” (4:9)

The bad blood between Jews and Samaritans dates back 700 years. The Assyrians defeated Israel’s ten northern tribes in 722 BC and dispersed them to the far corners of their mighty empire. These exiled Jews married Gentiles and were regarded as traitors. They read different Bibles and worshipped on different mountains.

It is jarring for Jesus to initiate a conversation with a woman in a public setting. The Talmud stipulates that rabbis were forbidden to speak to women in public, including their own wives and daughters. That’s why the disciples, later in our story, are stunned to find Jesus talking with a woman (4:17).

Jesus answers her question with striking candor: “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” (4:10).

She fails to connect the dots. This woman is so focused on physical water that she assumes Jesus must have access to another well fed by an underground spring.

Jesus presses the issue further: “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink the water I will give them will never be thirsty. The water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (4:14).

“Sir,” this woman says, “give me this water so I will never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water” (4:15).

What Jesus says next rocks her world: “Go, call your husband and come back” (4:16). She answers feebly, “I have no husband.”

“That’s right,” Jesus says, “for you have had five husbands and the one you’re living with now is not your husband” (4:17-18). Busted! This would explain why this five-time divorcée living with her boyfriend is coming to the well alone in the heat of the day. She’s been marginalized by virtually everybody. She suffers the indignity of being passed around by the male population in Sychar.
It’s not like Jesus to want to shame her. Rather, he wants her to name her situation so he can address her deepest need. She doesn’t need another husband. What she needs is a new life—the living water Jesus offers.

She’s uncomfortable talking about her personal life. That’s why she attempts to redirect the conversation to the age-old debate about which city and mountain is the proper place of worship. Jesus announces that the time is coming when people will worship God anywhere at any time. This is the point where she essentially throws up her hands: “When the Messiah comes, he will explain everything to us” (4:25).

“I am he,” Jesus says (4:26). When it comes to this matter of the Messiah, let’s just say, ma’am you’re looking at him.

All of us have longings. We long to be noticed. We long to be successful. We long to be appreciated. We long to meet someone or live somewhere or achieve a certain standard of living.

But our deepest longing is for God. If Augustine is right, that God has made us for Himself, there is nothing God can possibly give us beyond Himself. Our deepest longings can only be satisfied by God who places these longings inside of us.

Some of you will balk at the assertion that our deepest longing is for God. We know plenty of people who don’t seem the slightest bit interested in knowing God. Could it be that people don’t recognize their longing for God?

I didn’t recognize this longing earlier in my life. I didn’t know I was thirsty for God. I tried to assuage this spiritual thirst with temporal pursuits.

My body can be dehydrated but I don’t know it. I may not know that my irritability and fatigue stems from water depletion. Our souls can be blind and ignorant to our need for God.

I came to the realization that I was thirsty for God. My thirsty soul reached out to the living water God offers in Jesus Christ.

The Psalmist’s longing for God was so intense that he likened it to a deer frantically searching for water in a desert. “As a deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (42:1-2).
Jesus says elsewhere in John’s gospel, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within him” (7:37-38).

Jesus says to this thirsty woman, “Whoever drinks of the water I will give him will never be thirsty again” (4:14). This doesn’t explain why I am still thirsty for God. I drink from Jesus’ well of salvation, but still I’m thirsty.

I’m helped by something Thomas Shepherd, second president of Harvard University and a Congregational minister, said back in the 1630s. “There is in true grace an infinite circle. A man by thirsting receives and receiving thirsts for more.”

A.W. Tozer says much the same thing in his book, Pursuit of God: “O God, I have tasted thy goodness and it has both satisfied me and made me thirsty for more.”

One way to satisfy our longing for God is to engage in spiritual practices. Several Sundays ago, we introduced this Worship+2 formula. It’s outlined on pages 2-3 of today’s bulletin. We’re asking you to make worship your highest priority this fall. Additionally, we want you to identify one place for growth and one place for service in this church. Let me remind you why we are making such a big deal out of Worship+2. It’s the best way we know to love and serve God and satisfy our deep longing for God. C.S. Lewis wrote a classic tale for children of all ages called The Chronicles of Narnia. In book four of his six-part series, called The Silver Chair, Jill is walking through a forest in search of water. She hears the sound of running water in the distance. She comes upon a stream in a clearing. As she bends down to drink, she happens to notice a large Lion sitting by the riverbank near her.

“If you are thirsty, come and drink,” the Lion says. While she is dying of thirst, she is afraid to divert her eyes away from this ferocious beast.

“Aren’t you thirsty?” asks the Lion.


“May I—could I—would you mind going away while I do?” Jill asks. The Lion doesn’t budge but only lets out a low growl.

“Will you promise not to—do anything to me, if I do come?” Jill asks.
“I make no promise,” says the Lion. Jill is so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she takes a step nearer to the stream.

“Do you eat girls?” She asks.

“I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors,” says the Lion. It didn’t say this as if it was boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.

“I dare not come and drink,” says Jill

“Then you will die of thirst, says the Lion.

“Oh dear!” says Jill, coming another step nearer. “I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.”

“There is no other stream,” says the Lion.

If you are familiar with this famous children’s story, you know that this Lion is named Aslan. He functions like a Christ-figure in our story. Jesus offers living water for our parched, thirsty souls. There’s no use looking for this water elsewhere. It doesn’t exist. Augustine is spot-on when he wrote, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you, O Lord.”