



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

“Bottled Water”

John 4: 5-29, 39-42

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The 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.)^{} ¹⁰Jesus 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.’ ¹¹The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’ ¹³Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but 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.’ ¹⁵The 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.’*

¹⁶Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’ ¹⁷The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, “I have no husband”; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!’ ¹⁹The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you^{} say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’ ²¹Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’ ²⁵The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’ ²⁶Jesus said to her, ‘I am he,^{*} the one who is speaking to you.’*

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I have ever done.’ ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They 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.’

On Friday, at Pittsburgh Airport, I paid 2 dollars for a 20 oz bottled water. This comes to roughly 12 ½ dollars a gallon. Most of us complain bitterly about gasoline that gets above 3 dollars. Is there something that I am not getting? The bottled water industry is a 12-billion-dollar industry and growing 7 – 10% annually. Last year, Americans consumed more bottled water than milk or beer.

What is the attraction? Is this the proverbial “emperor’s new clothes”? Why are we willing to pay close to four times the price of gasoline for something that we can get from the tap for almost nothing? My guess is that we are looking for something better and we are willing to sacrifice to get something better. Why would we be willing to pay so much for water? Because we want something better.

We live with a level of dissatisfaction. We want something more, something better. This dissatisfaction is pervasive. Polls show we are dissatisfied with our government. We are dissatisfied with consumer products. We are dissatisfied with the service that we get. These are the outward manifestations of human dissatisfaction...but there is a deeper dimension that goes to our very being. Something seems to be missing in life, and we struggle to fill that void. Something within the human soul cries “it has to be better than this.” And so we seek better lives through better homes, better schools, better neighborhoods, better cars, better computers, better cell phones, and yes, better water. Better water, something so elemental and basic... how can we improve on it? By putting it in a better bottle?

The story of the woman at the well is all about better water. It operates on two different levels. At its basic level it is about ordinary water. But as John tells the story it is also about the purpose of life, the human need for hope. It is a story about filling a void in our lives that longs for something better. Today I want to look at this story, first in terms of the two different levels of dialogue that are occurring. Second, the meaning and promise of living water. Last, I will add a commentary on our contemporary life and how this story speaks to it.

I

The scene of the Samaritan woman and Jesus at the well has an almost comic quality to it. One wonders if she heard what Jesus was saying. Perhaps it was the awkwardness of the situation. They were at Jacob’s Well, at the foot of Mt. Gerazim, near what would be today the city of Nablus in the Palestinian territory. This was a holy place for the Samaritans. Jacob’s well was also associated with romantic love and courtship. It was at this well that Jacob met Rachel. Jesus, a Jewish male, was there alone with a Samaritan woman. It was extraordinary that Jesus and this un-named woman would even speak with each other, much less for Jesus to ask her for a drink. But after the awkward moments were put aside, Jesus began to speak of “living water.”

The Samaritan woman thinks that Jesus is talking about “spring water.” Better water! “Where can I get it?” Jesus went on to explain that his water was wonderful, and if she drank of it, she would never be thirsty again. I can imagine what was coursing through the Samaritan woman’s mind. “Water that will satisfy! I won’t have to come to the well and haul water again! Where can I get it?” She wanted Jesus’ better water.

But Jesus wasn’t talking about water. He was talking about life in all its dimensions particularly eternal life.

II

What was the promise of this “living water”? She believed that one sip and she would never be thirsty. In a dry parched area of the world, this was important. People got thirsty.

But Jesus was speaking about a different thirst, and hence a different water.

The key to this conversation is when we learn more about this anonymous woman. She was married five times and she was living with someone who wasn't her husband. She did not enjoy an easy life. She knew about the ups and down of life. She was familiar with the pain and grief of loss... the loss of life, and perhaps more importantly the loss of hope. She was not thinking in lofty terms. Life for her had no hopeful eternity; it was merely a struggle to get by. Water was what it was: water, and if she could get some better water to make life a bit easier; all the better.

But Jesus was not talking about drinking water. He was talking about "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." He was speaking about a different thirst: the thirst of the soul. It is the thirst for God, the thirst for the eternal, the thirst for something greater than what we can see, touch or swallow. This was the thirst that Jesus offered to quench.

Human beings thirst for God. We long for something more: something transcendent. We want to believe and hope in something greater than ourselves. For this thirst, Christ offers living water.

III

How do we attempt to slake this thirst for something more? Usually by buying or acquiring something more, something better, something newer, something promising to make life a little easier, a little better. This is known as *displaced fulfillment*. We try and fill the spiritual emptiness with something, and the new product, the new idea, the new diet always play upon our primal thirst. What is the "living water" you are seeking in your life? Where do you go to quench this thirst that does not seem quenchable? What do you do to ease that pervasive anxiety that is rooted in the knowledge that something is missing in your life?

The modern "self help" movement positions itself to relieve this anxiety. Amazon.com has over 150 thousand titles in their self-help section! We buy them and try them because we hope that they will have the key to unlocking the happiness for which we hunger. We all have our different approaches, our different answers, but more often than not; they leave us thirstier than when we first began.

The water that Jesus offers gushes up to eternal life. Where do we find this living water? We find it in prayer and meditation. Going off by ourselves and allowing ourselves to be vulnerable in the presence of God.

We also find Jesus's living water in service to others. Jesus commanded his disciples to serve "the least of these." This is the paradoxical nature of discipleship.

- By losing ourselves in service to others, we find ourselves.
- By taking up the cross, an instrument of execution and death, we discover life eternal.
- By emptying ourselves through helping others, we fill the spiritual emptiness residing deep within our own souls.

I am convinced that one of the causes for the emptiness and despair that many people feel, the sense of hopelessness and anomy that characterizes so many in our age, is our own self-directed lives. "It is all about me!"

One of the classic ways to overcome despair and depression is to allow something else in your life, care for someone, and give to something greater than yourself. This breaks the cycle of egotism that keeps us locked in the dungeons of our own despair.

Following her encounter with Jesus, the Samaritan woman did a remarkable thing. She went back to town and told others about Jesus and this living water of which he spoke. In sharing his message, she was twice blessed and became the first evangelist.

I suspect that we will continue to drink bottled water and pay the price, because we believe it is better more convenient water. We are always looking for something better... the story of the woman at the well is a story of one who was looking for something better, and found it that day, in the forgiving saving love of Jesus Christ.

If you are searching for something better. If you are thirsty for purpose, meaning and hope, go to the well... Drink the waters Jesus offers. This is the good news. Amen.