

Lent 3A 2017 Sermon2

John 4:5-42

Jesus 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.”

Richard Rohr writes: “All language about God is necessarily symbolic and figurative.”¹ Nobody knows this better than the Gospel-writer John. John’s Jesus tells us, “You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.” He does not mean that we are sodium chloride or electromagnetic waves in the visible spectrum. Yet in John’s Gospel, Jesus’ listeners often *hear* his words on a **physical** level, while Jesus *intends* them on a spiritual level. In last week’s Gospel story, Jesus told Nicodemus that nobody can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born again. Nicodemus takes this literally and puzzles about how anyone could crawl back into their mother’s womb and be born again. Of course we know that Jesus is speaking in *spiritual* terms, about our spirits being renewed, reborn, transformed.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman to go get her husband. She thinks he is speaking of a literal, physical husband, and since she is not married, she tells Jesus that she has no husband. But as Fr. John Shea points out, Jesus is **not** speaking about a *literal* husband, but rather about the god she worships.² (God is often referred to in the Bible as the “bridegroom” and God’s people as the “bride.”) In this metaphorical sense, Jesus tells her that she is right in saying she has no husband, since the god that this Samaritan woman worships is not the true God. And her 5 previous husbands symbolize the 5 pagan gods the Samaritans had brought back from their exile in Babylon. Applying this metaphor to our own lives, you and I might ask ourselves, “Who are **my** husbands – the gods whom **I** worship?” Typical “husbands” are money, success, good looks, our country or our flag, comfort, power, security, etc. They are our “husbands,” but not our True Husband, who is God alone.

But I’d like to focus today on the *other* metaphors and images that Jesus uses in today’s Gospel: the metaphors of water and food.

Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well, and asks her for a drink. At first she thinks Jesus is talking about literal, physical water, H₂O. But then Jesus tells 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 says to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep.” Like Nicodemus, she first hears Jesus on the physical level.

While the *woman* struggles with the metaphor of *water*, Jesus’ *disciples* struggle with the metaphor of *food*. As today’s story begins, the disciples have gone off to the village to buy food. When they come back, they urge Jesus to eat some food, but Jesus tells them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.”

Jesus speaks about *spiritual* water and *spiritual* food, and the woman and the disciples take him to mean *physical* water and *physical* food.

And do **we** not tend to do the same? Do we not focus on physical life and physical nourishment, with little, if any, regard to our spiritual life and spiritual nourishment?

Yesterday at our Vestry Retreat, we struggled with some questions. Some of them were, “What purpose does Christ Church serve in our community? If Christ Church were to disappear tomorrow, would Canon City miss us? At a time when people are leaving churches in increasing numbers, does the Church have anything to offer at all, not only to the world, but to our own members?” And one of the clear answers that we came up with was: **We do** have something to offer: we offer food for the hungry soul and water for the thirsty spirit.

The problem is that so many of us – not only those who do **not** attend church, but even many who **do** attend church – are so consumed with matters of our physical lives that we aren’t even aware that we *have* souls, that we *have* spirits; and therefore, we don’t realize that a huge part of us is starving for food and dying of thirst.

“If you knew the gift of God,” Jesus tells the woman (and us), “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 problem is that we **don’t** know the gift of God, so we *don’t ask*; with the result that our souls become emaciated and dried out for lack of spiritual food and water.

My friends, if Christ Church is here in this community for nothing else, it is here to offer spiritual food and drink: “a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

The reason that people aren’t flooding into the church is that they don’t **know** that they *need* spiritual food and drink, because they are so unaware of, and out of touch with, their own spirits and souls. And like Nicodemus and the disciples in today’s Gospel, even we who are good “church people” are often unaware of the

spiritual dimension of our lives, stuck, as *they* were, in relating only to our physical world. And when we **do** come close to being conscious of our deep spiritual hunger and thirst, we come face to face with our own vulnerability, and because we don't like being vulnerable or not in control, we often quickly close the door again, or refuse to remain vulnerable and let the Spirit of God change us.

Here is where the Samaritan woman can teach us, for unlike Jesus' disciples, she *engages* Jesus in ever-deepening conversation and questioning about matters of the spirit. She *begins* by understanding Jesus' words on the physical level, but she doesn't **stay** there; she hangs in there with him until she gets a glimpse of who he truly is, gets a sip of the Living Water which pours forth from him. She leaves her water jar at the well, since she is no longer concerned with physical water but with spiritual water, and she runs to invite her fellow townspeople to come and share this Living Water. "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" she tells them. Fr. Shea explains: "This does not mean that Jesus had supernatural knowledge of all the little-known facts of her life. Rather he told her the energizing center of her activity, the source that drove her."³ Jesus revealed to her her own spirit, which had been hidden from her consciousness; and he offered that thirsting spirit Living Water gushing to eternal life. And the crucial step in that process was her remaining in conversation with Jesus, even when it threatened her cherished Samaritan beliefs. She opened herself to be vulnerable to God's Spirit flowing into her and changing her.

The disciples, on the other hand, clearly avoided this openness, questioning, and vulnerability. They did **not** ask questions of Jesus, as the woman did. They did **not** enter into conversation with Jesus, even when they were puzzled. John tells us that when they returned from buying food, "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?'" Astonishment comes when we don't understand something; yet the disciples refuse to *pursue* their misunderstanding; this is **not** how one grows spiritually. When Jesus tells the disciples, "I have food to eat that you do not know about," they don't ask him what he means; rather, they speak *among themselves*, "sharing their ignorance."⁴ They refuse to enter into conversation with Jesus, refuse to enter into the vulnerable realm of the spirit. They went to the village to buy food because they are unaware of *inner* food and drink. Here they are in the presence of "Living Water and the Bread Come Down from Heaven, but they have left him to seek food and drink elsewhere."⁵ They think all the resources available are outside themselves.

One of the other questions we asked at our Retreat yesterday was: "How do *we*, members of Christ Episcopal Church, renew our *own* spiritual life, so that **we** might be renewed to go out and share Living Water and Bread from Heaven with OUR fellow townspeople, as the Samaritan woman did?" For we, too, tend to get all-consumed with our physical lives, and lose touch with our souls and spirits. It is not enough just to come to church each week, for clearly Nicodemus did that; it is not enough even to go through the motions of following Jesus, for clearly the

disciples did that. What was revealed to us yesterday at our Retreat is that we need to be more intentional about feeding our inner souls and spirits, drinking from the well that gushes up to eternal life. We need to follow the example of this outcast – this Samaritan woman, who kept asking questions and seeking answers, opening herself in total vulnerability to being changed at the most fundamental level of her understanding of God, opening herself in abiding relationship with the Incarnate Word, God enfleshed.

So the question before us is: How do we do that? How do we avoid the trap that Nicodemus and the disciples fall into – going through the outward motions, totally enmeshed in our physical lives – and instead feed and water our own spirits and souls? And then, how do we go to our own townspeople, as the Samaritan woman did, and make them aware that they even **have** an inner life, even **have** souls and spirits, which they have ignored far too long, and which are hungering and thirsting for the Living God? And how do we bring them to Heavenly Food and Drink?

AMEN

- 1 Daily email devotional, January 11, 2017
- 2 John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, pp. 120-121
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 123
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 124
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 117