

Give Me A Drink!
John 4:5-42

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Living in West Texas for four years was a revelation to me in several ways. First of all, these were pioneer people: all the women were strong, all the men were good looking, and all the children were above average and must be dealt with as such. Secondly, I found out that there is no hairspray that can withstand thirty mile-per-hour sustained winds. And lastly I learned the importance of water.

On my first Sunday there, and every Sunday thereafter, we prayed for “gentle and abundant rain”. San Angelo, Texas received approximately ten inches of rain the first year we lived there. We were under strict drought watering conditions. With sixty days per year hitting highs over 100 degrees, anyone whose yard wasn’t brown was violating the restrictions. When it did rain, people, especially farmers and ranchers, could be seen out dancing in it. Water was of great concern in West Texas, much as it was in Jesus’ land and time.

A few hours without water, and our mouths become like cotton, dark circles form under our eyes, and our lips grow chapped. A few days without it, and we become lethargic, weak, and exhausted. A human body can survive only about a week without any water. It is absolutely essential to life. All throughout the Old Testament God is likened to water. In Jeremiah, the Lord is “the fountain of living water”. In Isaiah it is prophesied that the Lord will “water us like a garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail”. In Zechariah, it is foretold that on the Day of the Lord, a fountain will be opened in Jerusalem to cleanse the people from sin, and living waters shall flow out of Jerusalem. And at the end of the Book of Revelation, a loud voice from the one seated on the throne says, “To the thirsty, I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.” It is so in our passage as well. Jesus picks up the same metaphor as Jesus offers living water to this woman, and to us. The living water Jesus offers is to quench not our physical thirst, but our spiritual thirst for God. To live, to really live, we need the living water Jesus offers us.

Humans have thirst for God inside us. At times we try to fulfill that thirst in strange and unproductive ways, not knowing what it is. We look for love in all the wrong places: in unhealthy relationships, in worldly success, in popularity, in self-sufficiency, or in the extremes of religion –either a strict self-righteousness or a complete rejection of the God we so desperately need. Today I am breaking down the thirst we have for God into three areas. See if you recognize your thirst.

Humans are thirsty to be known and loved for who we are. Only living water can quench that thirst. This woman at the well arrived at noon, during the heat of the day. Women in Palestine usually drew water in the evening and it became a social event. Around the well the news of the day is discussed, recipes are traded, and friendships are formed. This woman is either not included, or wishes not to include herself for fear of ridicule. She chose a time when she would not have to face the other women.

Along comes Jesus, who strikes up a conversation with her. This is the longest recorded conversation of any one person with Jesus. This conversation is strange to all who witness it or hear about it because the woman is a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans did not get along well. The Samaritans were half-breeds, descendants of the old Northern Kingdom of Israel who intermarried, against Mosaic Law, with the Assyrians. They worshiped in the wrong place and were lax about keeping the law. Most Jews would walk three days out of the way to avoid going through Samaria. Jesus headed straight for Samaria and straight for her.

Jesus' conversation with her is also strange because she is a woman. Women in the first century were looked upon as less valuable than a good horse and were not talked to by men, even their own husbands, in public. There were rabbinical debates as to whether women were really human and had souls.

Furthermore, this woman was poor. She is drawing her own water, or maybe even drawing it for someone else. Women of affluence had servants to draw water for them. So here is Jesus, a Jewish man, a rabbi even, talking to her and engaging her with respect. Jesus is offering this gift to her without regard to her race, her gender, or her position in society. Can you imagine the refreshment and surprise she must have felt at this man's kindness towards her? Can you imagine the refreshment of knowing that God offers grace regardless of her race or gender or position?

Often I am confronted with the fact that I am a woman in a predominately male field. In Georgia I was frequently asked shortly after being introduced to someone new, "Tell me again what church your husband is pastor of?" I know even in our own denomination, which has been ordaining women since the 1960's, that there are calls I will never even be considered for because of my gender. Some other denominations, those that do not allow women to even speak, hate me and they don't even know me. The only acceptable Biblical response from me to that kind of prejudice is to love them and pray for them and when given the opportunity, to minister to them. The church I served in Georgia had an all white membership until the year 2000. After I came, more and more persons of color were joining,

and I received complaints about it. We were growing, and long time members were complaining. When I registered Alia for kindergarten, and checked the box that identified her as mixed race, the glare from the woman doing our registration gave me a chill. One time I had a meeting with a civic group at a country club in Georgia. I wasn't allowed in the gate – even though my car was not junky and I was dressed nicely. I guess I just didn't look like I belonged there. My soul thirsts and faints for the living water Christ offers us for *in Him there is no male or female, slave or free, Jew or Greek, for we are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28)*. All people are thirsty for someone to love as respect them just as they are, regardless of race or gender or economic status. Everybody wants someone who truly knows them and loves them anyway. Give me a drink of this living water!

Humans are thirsty to be free of their past. Everyone has mistakes, regrets, and decisions that haunt us. This woman has been married five times and is now living with a man who is not her husband. We do not know if her husbands died or left her, but in that society a woman was doomed to abject poverty if she did not remarry. How many times did she get her hopes up, just to be crushed and begin another search for another man to love and support her?

Because of her illicit relationships she has been outcast and ridiculed by the other women. She is drawing water at noon. It is hot and her work is more difficult because of her past mistakes and the shame that they bring. Jesus knows all about her and yet he continues to engage her, even when she changes the subject on him. Jesus knows the toll her past has taken and offers her living water to quench the thirst of needing a fresh start in life.

There is a story about a preacher who was plagued most of his life by a sin he committed when he was in college. No matter how many times he confessed, no matter what he did, he could not shake the shame or the despair that went with what he did. He spent his ministry years frightened that someone might find out and then his ministry would be over. Well every week, a dear sweet lady who was a member of his church would talk to him after the service and say something like, “I spoke to the Lord this week and he said to tell you, “You are doing a great job” or “I love you”. The preacher really didn't believe she spoke to God, so one day when he was at the end of his rope he replied back to her, “If you really talk to God, ask him what sin I committed when I was in college. If you can tell me, then I'll believe you speak to God.” “Very well,” she replied. “I will ask.” The next week she returned and the preacher was anxious to catch her. If she knew his sin, he was ruined. If she didn't, she was a fake. So the preacher

approached her asking, “So, what did God tell you? Did he tell you what sin I committed in college?” “I asked,” she replied, “but God says he forgot.”

The living water that God gives washes away our sin, guilt, and shame, cleansing us from all unrighteousness. The living water that Jesus gives redeems our past and makes us new people. We so easily forget this. Can you see the gentleness and grace with which Jesus handles this woman’s past? Don’t you long for someone to be gentle with your mistakes and shortcomings? Aren’t you thirsty for someone with whom you can be honest and that can truly help free us from whatever is holding us back and beating us down? Give me a drink of that living water!

Humans are thirsty to be needed and used by God. The woman at the well, after she spoke with Jesus, went and told the people in the city about Jesus. She left her water jar and ran to tell. This woman became joyful and confident enough to associate with the people she was avoiding by drawing water at noon. The living water that flowed into her as acceptance and redemption flowed out to her community. A changed life gets people’s attention. John records that many from her city believed in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony. Jesus ended up staying in that city with the Samaritans for two days and many more people believed that Jesus was the savior of the world.

You can feel the joy of this woman leap off the page. It is because of her that her whole village believed in Jesus. No longer a useless has-been of a woman, she is needed and used by Jesus to spread the gospel. For those filled with living water, life is rich, splendid, and full. It is more than happy, it is joyful. It is more than healthy, it is whole. It is more than alive, it is radiant. It is more than successful, it is free. It is more than adequate, it is triumphant life. And that is the kind of life God can use to accomplish great things. That is the kind of church God will use to accomplish great things – a church full of people overflowing with life and ready to be used and useful for God and God’s kingdom.

Living water springing up in us will change and refresh us. Just like jumping in a cool pool at the end of a hot day or like a hot bubble bath when we are tired, the life giving water refreshes our spirits. When it pours down on us, just like ranchers and farmers in a drought, just like the woman at the well, we should be found out dancing in it. If you are thirsty, just call upon Jesus, the living fountain, to fill you full of his love and acceptance, to pour into you the assurance of your salvation, so that you are overflowing with joy and witness to everyone you know. Pray that our church will be filled and overflow with living water.