

Sermon: "At the Well"
Text: John 4:5-26

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When we were looking at homes in Waukesha we noticed that there was this disclaimer on every building inspection report which had something to do with Radon or Radium in the Waukesha water supply.

Our real estate agent said, “Don’t worry about that. Every house in Waukesha must make this statement in the building condition report (or whatever it is called).”

Every house’s water supply in Waukesha has radium in it which exceeds the federal guidelines for radium. I thought about looking up the amount that Waukesha is exceeding the federal guidelines, but, dear friends, I really don’t think I want to know.

I just know that the water in Waukesha is different from the water in Milwaukee and I know that it’s an issue between our two municipalities.

Well not just municipalities.

It seems that there is a continental divide between Waukesha and Milwaukee. The plain fact is that we crossed a continental divide when Sally and I moved to Waukesha—all the water from here to the west flows into the Mississippi water basin and all the water to the east flows into Lake Michigan, the great lakes and the St. Lawrence seaway.. And it has made all the difference in the water. It also has led to the great water wars of our time. If Milwaukee gives in to Waukesha and allows us to have Great Lakes’ water, all the great lakes states will have to give water to Arizona or some other water deprived state.

You also do a strange thing to water here that we’ve never done before. And we don’t know if it has anything to do with radium or not. You soften your water.

For the first decades of my ministry I lived on the other side of the subcontinental divide and we never had softened water. And softened water is an odd thing. First of all, when you shower with softened water, you can’t really tell whether all the soap is off of your body or not. Have you noticed that? I thought that this was just me, but then at Christmas time, our daughter and son-in-law stayed with us and then they showered on Christmas morning and my son-in-law said, “What’s the deal with the water?”

He couldn’t tell whether the soap was off his body. He’d rub and rub and it still felt slippery like there was soap on it.

And I was reminded that this was my first experience of Waukesha water. You all may know whether or not this is related to the radium issue, but it is enough to say that the

water here is different from Milwaukee because of the subcontinental divide.

All of which points to the importance of water even in our times.

Fresh water.

Softened water

Living water.

It is often the case with biblical stories that what we think is the main point is not the main point at all. There are many examples of that. Jonah and the Whale, for example. If you ask any Sunday School kid, they would tell you that the point of that story is that God is so powerful that God could even put a man inside a great fish for three days and the man would live.

The point of the story, they would tell you is that God can willy-nilly violate any of the natural laws God has so carefully placed in creation. And that, we are told is the point of the story.

But of course it is not. The point is that Jonah was running away from his responsibilities at the great city called Nineveh and while he was running away a storm came up, Jonah was thrown overboard and a great fish took him back to the shores of Nineveh and regurgitated him. (The confirmands are just going to have to look that word regurgitated up in the dictionary). The point, simply is that you cannot forever avoid the calling of God.

But most young children miss that point when they read all about it in those cute little Golden Book versions of Bibles.

So it is with this morning's lesson about Jesus and the Samaritan Woman by Jacob's well in the city now called Nablus north of Jerusalem now lost in the west bank area of Palestine. We easily miss the point. Jesus meets this woman by the well and what jumps out to our 20th century ears? Is it that he and she have this marvelous and sophisticated theological discussion about whether it is more appropriate to worship on top of Mt Gerazim near her home town or on top of Mount Zion in Jerusalem?

Is it that Jesus claims to be the living waters? Not radium waters or even Milwaukee, east of the continental divide waters, but living waters.

To our 20th Century ears, obsessed as they are with sex, the part of the story that leaps out to us is the fact that this unnamed Samaritan Woman has had five husbands. FIVE, count them, FIVE husbands and she was in search of yet another!

My favorite music group in my youth was Peter Paul and Mary and even they did a remake of an old Folk song called "Jesus met the woman at the well." and it focused on the fact that she had five husbands. What a SINNER we thought.

We have reduced, through our prejudiced ears, a marvelous and complex story to a simple story about a woman with too many husbands. And like the Jonah story, we have neatly avoided the point of the story.

I encourage you to hear this story with the ears of the ancient listener rather the listener of 2005.

First of all, water was as important then as it is to Waukesha now. Wells seem to be the place where women and men, in ancient days, met to discuss the days events— like the proverbial water cooler now. Fresh water was as an important part of life then as it is now.

Secondly, wells in ancient societies were sort of like the singles bars of the ancient world. If you wanted to meet an eligible young woman, one might go to the well of the city.

This was a oft-told story in ancient days. There was a young eligible bachelor. Either he or his representative would go to a foreign country and while on the trip would stop by a well for a drink. While he was at the well, a maiden would come to draw water for her family and the two would meet and conduct a discrete conversation.

After a discussion or other mysterious event, the woman would run back to her village and tell her family about what had happened at the well. Then the family, if pleased about what they heard, would extend hospitality to the man or his representative and marriage plans would then be announced.

It was a familiar story the form of which would have been very familiar to the ancient listener. That's how Isaac became engaged to Rachel. That's how Moses became engaged to Zipporah. And that's how Jacob became engaged to Rachel.

Wells were the singles' bars of the ancient world. Sort of like folks in singles' bars at the end of the working day. You're rested and you're open to all the possibilities of new relationships.

So, if you were an ancient Israelite, and someone began to tell you a story about a young unmarried man traveling to a foreign land, who stopped by a well, and was approached there by a woman, there would be no doubt in your mind what was about to take place. You just knew what this story would be about. This is a classic "boy-meets-girl" type of story.

Remember that Isaac came to meet Rebekah this way,

Jacob met Rachel this way

and Moses met Zipporah this way,

Encounters between a man and a woman at a well were a well known story in those days and the stories almost always ended up in marriage.

Now listen with ancient ears:

"So Jesus left Judea and departed again to Galilee. He had to pass through Samaria. So he came to a city of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. And so Jesus, wearied as he was with his journey, sat down beside the well. It was about the sixth hour (hours being measured by dawn this is about 12 noon).

And there came a woman of Samaria to draw water. And Jesus said to her, 'give me a drink.'" ("I'm from Waukesha" – just kidding!)

Now. . .if you were listening to this story with ancient ears you would have thought, hey, Jesus has finally found someone to be with for the rest of his life and live happily ever after. . .BUT the story has a built in scandal. The territory Jesus is in, is Samaritan territory and this is a Samaritan woman. The territory is across the continental divide between Jews and Samaritans and he shouldn't be drinking the water.

It is hard for us to understand how much the people of Israel hated the Samaritans. The angers and enmities go back too far to explain here, but suffice it to say that they just didn't get along. In fact, most Jews avoided going through the Samaritan territory altogether, heading, instead on the other side of Jordan in order to get to Galilee.

The point about the Samaritans is made again and again in the Gospels. The man who is beaten and left for dead on the side of the road is helped by a Good Samaritan even though all the good folks of his day pass by on the other side.

Of the ten lepers who were healed by Jesus, only one returned to offer thanks and praise and this tenth leper was a Samaritan.

Then the story gets worse. This is not only a Samaritan woman---for goodness sake, she's not even a maiden. She is not a virgin. She's been married five, count them, FIVE times and is currently investigating the possibility of a sixth husband! This is hardly the unblemished rose with whom one might expect Jesus to get involved.

It might make sense if Jesus did not know what kind of woman she really was, but Jesus **did** know about this woman; in fact, he knew everything about her. He knew all about her, and yet he persists in the scene, asking her for a drink and then offering living water to her instead.

It is here that the heart and real meaning of the story is revealed -- here in the story where the bonding between the maiden and the bachelor took place. Here it is that we discover that it is not her lineage that binds her to Jesus, nor her chastity. There is only one thing that binds her to him, and him to her.

And it is her thirst for life, for living water.

The fact that she had so many husbands simply underscores how very deeply she was searching for wholeness and happiness, unsuccessfully searching for her whole unfulfilled life.¹ Searching, that is, until Jesus enters her world and offers to completely quench her thirst.

In a certain way, Jesus is betrothed to her, in the same way that he is betrothed to each one of us who are chasing desperately after artificial and unfulfilling ways to achieve happiness. We may not have a succession of husbands, but we may have a succession of jobs, or diets, or therapy books, or drugs or too many sessions with Dr. Phil or Sanjay Gupta or a hundred other options along our way.

Each in our own way are asking that most eternal of questions: What must I do to be saved? What will most safely and surely bring me to the center of my life and allow me to live there securely and happily?

Often the question gets asked in times of extreme crisis. It is in crises that we ask the most existentially troubling questions.

At the point of a failed marriage,

A failed job.

A failed attempt at reconciliation with someone you most deeply love but have not been able to speak with for years.

And we speak with the voice of the Samaritan woman,

I have no bucket and the well is deep.”

You know, we buy water at the grocery store. How strange really. The most expensive is Evian Water. It pretends to be from France. But as my daughter has pointed out, the word Evian is Naive spelled backwards.

We in Waukesha try to buy water from the Great Lakes basin hoping that we can get rid of our radium. The fact is that we are looking for the pure water in all the wrong places.

We are willing to pay a premium for the water of the purest kind, but the fact is that the living water is available to us without money and without price. It is there just for the asking.

Just for the asking.
Just for the asking.
Living water. Pure water.
Just for the asking.
Amen.