

Lent A3
March 19, 2017
“Boot Camp for the Soul: Hydrate”
Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair
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John 4:5-42

⁵So 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, 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.”** ¹⁴The 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.” ¹⁵Jesus said to her, **“Go, call your husband, and come back.”** ¹⁶The 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!”** ¹⁷The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ¹⁸Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ¹⁹Jesus 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.”** ²⁰The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²¹Jesus said to her, **“I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”**

²²Just 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?” ²³Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁴“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” ²⁵They left the city and were on their way to him. ²⁶Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” ²⁷But he said to them, **“I have food to eat that you do not know about.”** ²⁸So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” ²⁹Jesus 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.”** ³⁰Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” ³¹So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ³²And many more believed because of his word. ³³They 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.”

If you are in a boot camp at the YMCA or just working out hard you probably bring a bottle of water with you. At our house the last few weeks Karen has been inviting her triathlon friends to come and run with her early in the morning as they get ready for next weekend’s Montclair Half Marathon. Since our house is on the race route Karen has been putting bottles of water out on the lawn so her friends can take a break and get a drink rather than carrying their bottles with them for 3 or 4 hours. One thing you have to have when you’re running a race is water.

1.

Jesus himself has had quite a workout, walking with his disciples through the desert in Samaria on his way to Galilee at the very northern end of Israel. He stops for a rest at a famous well and the disciples go on into town. Jesus needs a drink. He needs help getting a drink from this well that is about 150 feet deep.

So he asks a Samaritan woman who has come alone to the well with her bucket to help him. They are both in need of water, different kinds of water as we will see, but they are both a little vulnerable when they meet. And Jesus begins with a request that she help him.

This summer our church youth group is going to try something different, serving needy and vulnerable people in an urban area, in Washington, D.C. And no, it won’t be the Congress or the White House or

the Supreme Court they will be serving, although they are all rather vulnerable right now and, now that I think about it, this encounter at the well might also speak to their situation, but our youth will be working face to face with folks who are poor and hungry and homeless, who are not known by many, who are without support except those like our youth who are willing to meet them where they are. Hopefully our national budget and health care and safety nets will not sell the numbers of this vulnerable population.

What I am interested to see on this mission trip is how our youth handle being in a vulnerable position themselves. While I don't believe it will be dangerous it will certainly feel as though we are out of our element there, we will be dependent on others for guiding our work. We will be working with people who are suffering in ways we are able to avoid here in Montclair for the most part. We will be emotionally and intellectually and spiritually vulnerable. I believe, as this encounter at the well shows, that being vulnerable, being out of total control makes us more open to God, more open to a deeper relationship, and more open to the ministries God calls each of us to pursue. How will we handle it in Washington and how will it affect us?

Well, Jesus breaks the ice with a question, with a request for help from another vulnerable person. "Will you give me a drink?" (v7) (I know our Bible translation makes it sound like a command, but the underlying intent is a question instead.) "*Would you please* give me a drink?" She is in charge. She, a woman in her culture, is in charge. She, a lowly Samaritan according to tradition, is in charge. Jesus meets her just as she is and gives her some dignity right off the bat.

And so the conversation begins. Jesus humbles himself before her and she reveals more vulnerability-her life is broken at home and in the community. She needs to be healed and no one cares, she's an embarrassment to be ignored, no one else is concerned how deeply she's suffering. In fact they pile on whenever they can, to keep her down.

Who among us doesn't understand this woman? Who hasn't found themselves at one time or another desperately thirsty for healing? To be included, accepted, welcomed? Just to be seen for who they really are and how they really feel...to be met in their vulnerable state...and offered some basic dignity?

Jesus sees her, he sees you, and he knows your life.

2.

It's interesting how this conversation between the woman and Jesus seems to be about religion. She knows he's a Jew and Jews didn't talk to Samaritans, and Jews had laws about drinking from a cup that a Samaritan had touched, and Jews had rules about men and women not being alone together. She knew his religion did not approve of the Samaritans worshiping God on Mt. Gerazim rather than in Jerusalem at the temple. But Jesus crosses all those boundaries, his religion is about mercy and grace and compassion and healing. Boundaries, borders, limits are set aside for the sake of God. Jesus invites

her to imagine that both her and his cherished religious traditions matter little if they do not enable a relationship with God and all God's children.

Some day, Jesus says, we won't worry about where we worship God or how. Worship won't be a contest between Reformed worship and Catholic worship, or any other. The point is connecting spiritually with the living God whose Messiah is Jesus and whose truth leads us to live justly and lovingly with our neighbor.

This is why I talk about spiritual and faith practices and do classes about them from time to time. This is why we start session meetings with a time of reflection and focus on being spiritually connected with God before we start working together.

Jesus says that with him we can meet God spirit to Spirit. In Jesus we know the truth, we see the truth, we experience God's truth.

Jesus humbles himself by asking the woman for a drink.

He sees her and knows her life.

He invites us to imagine, to realize, that we are cherished, and to know that God is available always and everywhere through the Spirit.

3.

And the woman sees herself differently. She is someone who matters. She is whole. She belongs. She has value.

My uncle who was a preacher, and who preached weekly to high school students, loved to say, "God don't make no junk." Jesus offers living water to you and me. He invites us to see ourselves as he sees us, to be healed and valued as the woman was. She not only drinks of his living water but suddenly for her "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5.24)

I was privileged to be part of a small group once at a church I was serving. This group of adults met every week and we asked a lot of questions about God and about each other. We shared our hurts and our brokenness and over months gradually grew closer to God and each other. There was a sense of healing in this group, a deepening sense that God was holding us close. In this small group there was a woman named Helen and her encounter with God, with Jesus, lifted her to new realizations of her value and her connections with others. She could imagine herself in new ways. She felt challenged and empowered to respond. Among other things she helped establish something called Stephen Ministry in that congregation. She was one of several people who visited those who were broken and distressed so they would have someone who could see them and know them and listen to them and invite them to be healed and share the living water of God's love with her.

Where is your well? Where can you go to be cherished and welcomed and healed? There is a well in Jesus Christ that does not run dry, a well with water that will satisfy your thirst. There is living water that overcomes barriers that you have built or others have built around you. There is living water that can transform your self-image. There is living water that can empower you to share the good news of God's love and bring others to the well, especially those who are on the margins, so they can drink, too.

This living water is the source of life for us as individuals and as a congregation. As we continue to make our way in life and to reshape our ministries as a congregation, may we come to the well and be seen, and known, and healed, and challenged, and empowered, and sent out to others.

One thing we have to have when we're running a race, is water.