

Seekers, Sinners, Saints (III): She Was Thirsty
A Sermon by Louise F. Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
24 February 2008
Text: John 4:5-42

I thrilled recently to a newspaper travel reporter's account of climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest peak, which does not require technical skills or equipment. You can do it by simply putting one foot in front of another, ascending 19,340 feet (which is almost 5000 feet higher than anything in my beloved Rockies). This reporter made his climb with a guide service that boasted 100% success rate, and spoke glowingly of the physical stamina and endurance tested by the climb, which nonetheless were eased in the company of experienced traveling companions who knew the way. The photos at the summit revealed a breathtaking vista, framing members of the group slapping high fives all around. I was ready to sign up! (and if you remember the three sermons developed from my Grand Canyon hike, imagine the preaching gold mine in this adventure!)

The "journey" metaphor provides a powerful description of a life lived with purpose and discovery. It speaks of being "on the way," of shaking off lethargy and moving forward towards a destination. To journey requires resources and involves risk, and always takes you somewhere else. The Lenten sermon series draws from this metaphor to describe the life of faith as a journey, a process of deepening our relationship with God, guided by Jesus, and shared with a community of fellow hikers. Each week, we are meeting biblical seekers whose encounters with Jesus somehow changed them. But it's funny about seeking; sometimes you know that you're on a quest: you ask questions, you sign up, you take a class, you climb a mountain. Life's transitions—a birth, a death, marriage, divorce, graduation, changing jobs---each can prompt a new round of seeking, for example. But sometimes you're not aware of any search. The river of days flows along and you go

with it, for better or for worse. That's the case with the seeker in today's biblical text. Her life has had its ups and downs; there have been a few false starts and plenty of missteps. She has absorbed the consequences of those with resilience and a certain resignation. When she went to the familiar well of her ancestors for the daily routine of drawing water, she was not aware of her thirst. She was not anticipating anything beyond what would meet the day's needs of bathing, cleaning, and drinking. But then a man, a stranger, makes a request of her. And so it turns out the woman at the well was not so much the seeker as the sought. The conversation she and Jesus have is the longest recorded in the gospels—longer than ones with his disciples, with his critics, with members of his own family. Because the reading is long and explores several complementary themes, I'll read it in three sections, and make some comments in between. Listen for God's Word to you in the reading from the gospel according to John, in the fourth chapter, beginning at the fifth verse. [READ JOHN 4:5-15]

[pour a full glass of water from pitcher]

Nothing refreshes like a glass of pure, cold water. And nothing is more important for sustaining life. Even before birth, we are protected and nourished, suspended in amniotic waters. Health care professionals remind us to drink 8 glasses of water each day, and in developing nations, a ready source of clean and safe water is a primary task towards eradicating poverty. Without water, living things will die. Jesus uses the woman's thirst for well water as a way of identifying a thirst quenched only by "living water," and then by offering her that water. She doesn't get it at first, taking his words literally and wondering aloud how he proposes giving her that water without a bucket and a rope. Next she appeals to tradition—the well from which she draws water has been around for centuries, established by the one of the revered patriarchs of their common faith. Jesus counters this argument by pointing out the insufficiency of even this ages-old watering hole. *It will satisfy you today, but you'll be thirsty again tomorrow. I'm talking about living water that will fulfill your deepest need, and will flow in*

unending supply. Her response to Jesus' invitation is positive, but ambiguous enough so you're not sure she understands completely what he means by living water. And then, suddenly, Jesus gets personal.

[READ JOHN 4:16-30]

Jesus met people wherever they were. The gospels are full of accounts in which Jesus ate with sinners, chose people with checkered histories to be his followers, and listened with compassion to their tales of woe. What's fascinating about this encounter is that Jesus sought out the Samaritan woman; he asked her for a drink of water. The ensuing conversation leads to Jesus' testimony that he is the long-hoped for Messiah, the savior of the world. We quickly learn that there are at least three reasons why she seems an unlikely choice to be the recipient of this amazing news. First, she's Samaritan, member of a break-off sect considered by observant Jews to be infidels, little better than pagans. Then, she's a woman. It's not just that women were considered inferior in that ancient world. It's that they were invisible. Not to be seen or heard. Men and women were not even allowed to worship together, let alone talk theology. . . .in public! And finally, we learn she's also a fallen woman. Married five times, currently living with a man she's not married to, she's clearly outside respectable standards. Women of that time came to the well to draw water in the morning, to socialize along with the work. The Samaritan woman's arrival at noon suggests that she was probably not welcome then—and rather than enduring their judgmental stares, the whispers and nudges, just skips it and comes later.

But Jesus is different. Every time she backs away from him, he moves toward her. He refuses to be deterred from giving her the water she needs—not by custom, not by religious law, not even by her own fears. When she's afraid Jesus has gotten too close, I love the way she introduces a long-standing religious argument between Jews and Samaritans. Hopefully, this will sidetrack Jesus and get the focus off her own thirst. But even more I love the way it doesn't work. Jesus will not let her go. His self-disclosure to her—to *her!*—reveals the Source of life-

giving water, quenching every thirst—even ones of which she was unaware. And lo and behold, it's a Someone, who knows "everything" about her, and yet is still standing there, smiling, arms outstretched. For a woman who had known many men, here at last is one who knows her...and loves her precisely for herself. It's an entirely new reality for the Samaritan woman, a new way to see God, a new way to understand her own life and purpose. *[some of these ideas are adapted from a commentary by Barbara Brown Taylor, Reflections on the Lectionary, in The Christian Century, February 12, 2008, p.19]*

Friends, Jesus still offers living water: to the thirsty, and to those who don't know how thirsty they are. He shows us who we are ---who we *really* are--- all of it: the good, the bad, and the ugly; the brave, the true, the vulnerable, and the part of us that is dying of thirst. What the Samaritan woman couldn't quite get her mind around also confounds us: Jesus is the Seeker in this story. He's looking for us. Jesus isn't satisfied until every one of the barriers we've thrown up in a misguided effort to secure our lives, has been brought down so that nothing can keep us from the life-giving spring.

Did you find it curious that the woman's first impulse is to go back to her village and tell her neighbors about this man who "told me everything I have ever done?" She has lived among them uneasily, yet her testimony is compelling enough to get them on their feet and on the way to him. Picking up the narrative at verse 39: [READ 4:39-42]

The very best definition of evangelism I've ever heard is "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." Here, one thirsty sinner tells other thirsty sinners where to find water. Finally, friends, the purpose of spiritual enlightenment is more than self-fulfillment; it is for the mutual benefit of the entire community; the healing of the nations, the reconciliation of the whole creation. As a congregation, we've considered many ways and means to share the good news with others, to open our doors widely to member and stranger alike. We are guided in our search by this Samaritan woman, who got found by

Jesus and couldn't wait to share him with others. There is no divide between ministries that cultivate personal spirituality and ministries that take Jesus to the streets of our city. [*Take another deep drink of water*] It's all about the water, the living water gushing up to eternal life, offered by the One who is the savior of the world.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE, WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S GLORY IN UNION WITH JESUS CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER!

The late, great author Kurt Vonnegut once said that his epitaph should read, "The only proof he needed of the existence of God was music." And it's true, music can connect us to the divine in ways beyond words, beyond thought, beyond reason. Music can be the language of praise transcending our limited ability to express the inexpressible. Our minister of music, Bob Moncrief, frequently reminds us that the primary choir of our church is the congregation. It's clearly not about "performance," but about worship. Our spiritual practice this morning invites us to pray by hearing music, of relaxing into the sound of [piano] [bells] and listening for God's Word, refreshing and life-sustaining as....water.

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