

**“Living Water”**  
**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Scripture: John 4:4-30**  
**February 24, 2008**

The associate professor faces a daunting challenge every Tuesday and Thursday morning this semester – a class filled with freshmen at 8:00 a.m. When she strides into class, she finds an auditorium filled with sleepy, resistant college students whose primary focus is their Grande Caffe Latte. The students live in hope that its 150 milligrams of caffeine will provide them the jolt they need to keep their heads aloft for an hour.

The professor begins pre-class chit chat with those sitting in the first few rows, and little by little, the next row of students wants to know what’s so funny up front. The interest grows one row at a time, until even those sitting in the back become curious and have their ears perked for what is being said.

The professor also has a senior seminar class that is the polar opposite. In that class, she can walk into the room, toss out a question and all the students are immediately engaged in discussion.

When the professor was asked about her strategy with the first class, she says that she assumes that with the freshmen, the thirst for knowledge is present within them, but it is hidden. She says, “I have to draw awareness to their thirst, so that my subject matter may quench it.”<sup>1</sup>

We discover a similar strategy employed by Jesus in this morning’s passage from the Gospel of John. Jesus uncovers a woman’s thirst and then addresses how it can be quenched.

Our passage begins with these words: “Jesus had to go through Samaria.” Now, it’s easy to skip over what sounds like a minor detail until we realize that John is not providing us with a tidbit of geography so that we don’t have to rely on Map Quest. The gospel writer is not telling us that Jesus was traveling from point A to point B, thus, his route took him through Samaria. John’s brief comment is not in the interest of geography, but rather theology. He is informing us that Jesus is temporarily leaving the confines of traditional Judaism and is going to people whom the Jews consider to be outsiders; and not merely outsiders, but enemies.

The bad blood between Jews and Samaritans could be traced back over 700 years. However, this intense rivalry went from bad to worse about 200 years before Jesus stepped into Samaria. The Samaritans built a shrine on Mount Gerizim and declared that this shrine, not the Jerusalem Temple, was the proper place of worship. Angry words and accusations were hurled back and forth for several decades until Jewish troops marched to Mount Gerizim and destroyed the shrine. So what we are being told is that Jesus felt compelled to enter enemy territory.

The passage says that Jesus is tired and thirsty from the day’s journey, so he plops down by the town well around noontime. For a few minutes he is alone. However, within a short while, a woman approaches to draw water. As she nears the well, Jesus asks her for a drink, and when he does, he breaks two social conventions. Jews do not speak to Samaritans and Jewish men do not speak to unknown women. In fact, the ancient sages counseled Jewish teachers with these words: “He that talks much with a woman brings evil upon himself...and in the end will inherit hell.”<sup>2</sup> Enlightened bunch, those ancient Hebrew sages! Obviously, there is a whole

sermon in Jesus' disregard for social norms regarding women and how he sought to elevate their status, but that is for another day.

It is helpful to know that most women gathered at the well early in the morning, before the sun beat down its scorching heat. It was an opportunity for them to draw water before the temperature rose, but it was more than that. It was also a place for the women to gather and catch up with one another. It was a place for conversation and swapping news and supporting each other.

The woman who bumps into Jesus because she is drawing her water at noon was not a part of that group. So it's immediately apparent to Jesus that something is up with this woman. Why doesn't she come to the well at the same time as the other women in town?

However, before asking a leading question that reveals the woman's life story, Jesus requests a drink. She is startled that he would initiate a conversation with her and replies, "How come you, a Jewish man, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" And for a moment, she may think "Aha, he is beholden to me. He needs what I have." But it lasts only a fraction of a second, because Jesus responds, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is asking for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

The woman says, "You don't have a bucket and the well is deep. Where do you get this living water?"

Now, the Gospel of John loves to use words with two layers of meaning. The character in the story only comprehends the literal meaning, while we the readers, understand that the gospel writer is driving at something deeper. So the woman in this story thinks Jesus is talking about a spring where water continuously gushes forth, yet we know that he is talking about a different kind of water that quenches a different kind of thirst.

Jesus helps her understand that he is not referring to spring water as opposed to water in a cistern; he's talking about life-giving water. He says, "Everyone who drinks of the water from this well is going to 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." And the woman pleads with him, "Give me some of *that* water!"

Jesus goes on to reveal just how desperately she needs this life-giving water. He says, "Go get your husband and then come back." The woman freezes in place and replies, "I have no husband." Jesus says, "That is correct. You've had five husbands and the one you are living with currently isn't your husband." And in those few and very direct words the woman is confronted with the story of her life. The bitter disappointments, the poor decisions, the broken promises, the cruel words, the hurt feelings, the embarrassing moments, the shattered dreams.

All of this began when the woman came to the well to draw water because she was thirsty. It was the middle of the day, when the sun was beating down and her throat was dry. But in the ensuing conversation with Jesus, it became apparent that not only was her body a little dehydrated, her entire soul was parched. The woman at the well was thirsty indeed. She was thirsty for friends, thirsty for respect, thirsty for forgiveness; she was thirsty for true love, for a life of meaning, for genuine hope.

This past October, four weeks prior to the New York City Marathon, the Chicago Marathon was held. It was a disaster. The temperature on race day soared into the upper 80s, much too hot for a marathon. The first few waves of runners used so much water – not only

drinking it, but dousing it on their heads – that when the runners from the middle of the pack to the end reached the water stations, the water was gone. Runners pushed on in the scorching temperatures despite the lack of water, but after several miles, dehydration began to take its toll. Some runners got cramps, others collapsed to the pavement. More than 200 runners were sent to the hospital and one died. The runners who stayed in the race slowed their pace, many of them simply shuffling and stumbling their way along the course.

When I look around at people today, I see many who remind me of those dehydrated runners. They have deep thirsts within themselves that are not being quenched, and they are just shuffling and stumbling their way through life. They bring their bucket to the well named “pleasure” and they get a sip, but it does not quench their thirst. So they trot over to the well named “wealth” and dip their bucket in, but it, too, provides only temporary relief. They scamper to the well named “entertainment” which provides a momentary distraction from the things for which they truly thirst, but all the while, they are shriveling up inside.

The Samaritan woman at the well was so parched and dry within – her soul so shriveled – that she may have grown cynical and despairing like so many today. However, she had not abandoned all hope, because when Jesus spoke of living water, she was aroused to new possibilities.

The living water that Jesus gives her is overwhelming love. It is love that embraces her and accepts her and heals her. But the life-giving water that Jesus gives is not for her alone. God’s love is never for us alone. It’s always meant to spill beyond us so that it flows into the lake of humanity. It is meant to be shared with others and to remind us that we all swim in the same sea.

Notice what the Samaritan woman does after she tastes the life-giving water of Christ. She does not indulge in a personal and private spiritual experience. The text tells us that she leaves her water jar behind – a sign that she no longer needs it because she has been filled with living water – and she runs to her neighbors to share it with them.

What is this living water metaphor? Living water is the life-giving Spirit of God that assures us that we are loved and forgiven, and reconciled to our Creator. Life-giving water quenches our thirst for meaning and purpose, and leads us to discover rich and rewarding lives. Life-giving water quells our anxiety about our fragile and finite existence, and assures us that nothing in life or death can separate us from God. And finally, life-giving water sends us to others to overcome the obstacles and to burst through the barriers so that we can reconcile our relationships.

Timothy Tyson tells the story of the race riots that occurred in Oxford, North Carolina in 1970. His father was a Methodist pastor in Oxford during that era, and at one point he invited the Reverend Samuel Proctor the renowned African American minister and president of North Carolina A & T College, to preach at his church. No black pastor had ever preached at that all-white church, and when news of the invitation spread through the community, Tyson started receiving death threats. One caller threatened to blow up his house with his wife and children in it.

Tensions mounted and rumors were flying, and the governing board of the congregation called an emergency meeting to discuss how they should deal with the crisis. During that meeting, church members demanded that Reverend Tyson withdraw his invitation. It was an

ugly meeting filled with bitter words, but in the midst of it, Miss Amy Womble, an elementary school teacher who had taught in the church's Sunday School for 30 years, stood up to speak. She looked around the room and said, "I've been reading about something that happened up near Chapel Hill, where a teenage boy took a curve too fast in his car and crashed. He was lying by the side of the road. And some people who came upon the wreck were standing around waiting for the ambulance to arrive and pick up his body and take it to the funeral home. Then an airman who was on furlough came driving by and he stopped. He saw the boy lying there and he got down on his knees next to him. He opened his mouth and saw that the boy's tongue was stuck in the back of his throat; and he stuck his finger in and pulled out the boy's tongue. He started giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, and by the time the ambulance drove up, he was revived! They had a big dinner up in Chapel Hill for this airman celebrating his saving of that boy's life. What I haven't told you," Miss Womble said, "is that the boy who was saved was white and the man who saved him was black." And then she said, "Which one of you fathers would say to that airman, "Don't you run your black finger down my son's white throat. Don't you put your black mouth on my boy's mouth." A few minutes later, the church board voted 25 to 14 to stand with their pastor, and Proctor's visit came off without a hitch.

But, later on the evening of the meeting, one of the people who had been most opposed to the black pastor's coming, a man named Grayson Byron, came by the church manse. Byron, a bachelor who worked in the local mill, was a tough guy. He was standing on Reverend Tyson's front porch and he couldn't stop crying. He said, "I want to tell you preacher, something happened to me. When Miss Amy was talking, something happened to me that ain't never happened before. A love came up in my heart. I want to tell you I love you and I love Dr. Proctor. I love everybody!

The next day, some of the folks in town accused Reverend Tyson, the Methodist minister, of serving wine at the emergency meeting of the church board. What else could explain all the people leaving that meeting crying and professing love of neighbor and voting the way they did?<sup>3</sup>

What they didn't know, what they could not imagine was that this inexplicable behavior was not fueled by alcohol, but from a spring of living water welling up inside of a small woman and flooding over people who did not even recognize that they were dying of thirst.

Are there areas of your life that are parched and dry? Are there facets of your existence that have shriveled up? Open your life to Christ's life-giving water so that you can live the abundant life God wants you to live.

## NOTES

1. Lisa M. Hess, quoting Fred Craddock in "Pastoral Implications," in *Lectionary Homiletics*, February – March 2008, p.30.
2. Gail O'Day, "The Gospel of John," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume IX*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p.565.
3. Scott Black Johnson relates this story from Timothy B. Tyson's book, *Blood Done Sign My Name: A True Story*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004).