

## WHAT IS LIVING WATER?

### Lent 3 – Year A: John 4:5-42

Some years ago, when our subdivision lacked houses and fences, we would go for walks on our neighbours' property, before it was our neighbours' property, if you know what I mean. Some lots sold faster than others, and one day we discovered why. As we walked along the back of one of the lots across the street from our house – a perfectly dry, sunny day, by the way – we came upon water bubbling up out of the ground all over what would one day be someone's back yard. "There are a lot of springs over there," yelled our neighbour Val, who saw us looking incredulously at the ground. "Anyone would be foolish to build there." Eventually the lot sold, but I think drainage was arranged before construction began.

It was probably not the first time I had seen living water bubbling out of the ground, but the fact that it appeared where it did, about 100 metres from our home, gave me a start. As urban as our little subdivision appeared, I realized, in that moment, we were very much in the country.

For someone living in a dry part of the world, the part of the world in which Jesus travelled, water springing from the ground would have a completely different value. It would be something to celebrate, to share, and enjoy. Canadians are blessed with such an abundance of water and snow, we have to work a bit at getting inside the world of Jesus and the woman from Sychar, a world in which pure, clean, drinking water was in short supply and had to be drawn from an old, deep well for both people and livestock. When Jesus tells the woman at the well that he will give her living water, and that she will never be thirsty again, his claim is virtually beyond belief. Eagerly, she responds, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

As with much of the dialogue in John's gospel, Jesus' conversations with people take place on both a literal and a metaphorical level. In this conversation, Jesus suggests to the woman that when he talks of "living water" it means more than a spring bubbling up in the grass. Referring to what he has called "living water," he tells her "the water that I will give will become in [people] a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." Her answer, "Give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water" is just one example of the irony that is so characteristic of the fourth gospel. As in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, our Gospel last Sunday, there is misunderstanding in Jesus' exchange with the woman at the well, a misunderstanding which is left to the reader to resolve. The intended resolution, is the reader's / our identifying with the woman's comment and not misunderstanding; making the connection Jesus intended (we assume) between his proclamation and eternal life: his "living water" becomes in those who follow him, we read, "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." And the woman's response about never thirsting again is something we, as readers of this passage, might consider metaphorically; specifically as a reference to the powerlessness of death, an essential principle in Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God.

Deftly, their conversation moves into dialogue about the woman's personal life, into which Jesus appears to have a window. And it is his reading of her life story, without ever having known her, that raises her consciousness, so to speak, of the significance of their encounter. She says, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet." Jesus, then, uses her insight for a teaching on (what we might call) essential worship, worship that transcends dogma, which, in turn, becomes the occasion for him to reveal himself to her as the Messiah.

In a few minutes, the woman leaves her water jar behind at the well and walks back to Sychar where she starts telling everyone she sees what has just happened. She says of Jesus that "he told [her] everything [she] had ever done," and then poses the question, "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" More irony! We know that Jesus has told her that he is the Messiah, but she uses this information in such a way that others might discover him for themselves.

There is now an interlude, a conversation between Jesus and the disciples concerning food – a conversation not unlike the conversation Jesus had with the woman at the well about water. In this instance, Jesus tells the disciples that his mission is his food. He then makes another reference to eternal life and the disciples' part in his mission of proclaiming the nearness of God and the imminence of the kingdom of heaven.

But then the story of the woman from Sychar continues, this time with the citizens coming to him at Jacob's well, inviting him to stay with them. John tells us that many came to faith during Jesus' two-day sojourn in Sychar, relating their testimony, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe," speaking to the woman who had met Jesus at the well, "for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world."

I must tell you that, for me, the real story here is Jesus' seamless entry into Samaritan territory, sharing his ministry and mission with the Samaritans, and then spending two days with the citizens of Sychar as their guest. John would probably have us note how receptive these foreigners were to Jesus' proclamation and how resistant the Pharisees were. But Jesus is the one who, not just here but in other instances as well, breaches the gap, who takes down barriers, who rejects sectarianism and prejudice. Is this not the gospel? Is this not, in fact, "living water" as well?

It did not take the church long to appropriate the sign of living water as a sign of God's reign among us. The water of baptism is, in its most pure form, living water. Christians are baptized in lakes, rivers, and oceans in order to embrace the full dimension of Jesus' teaching to the woman at the well and to the wider community of disciples. Churches install circulating pumps in their baptismal fonts so that candidates for baptism can be immersed in living water. In New Hamburg and in many other places around the world, "living water" becomes the name for churches: Living Water Christian Fellowship is a well-established congregation in New Hamburg. Yes, we celebrate the gift of eternal life that we receive through faith in Jesus as God's Messiah, but we also celebrate the Word of radical love that is nothing less than the gospel itself. We are baptized with living water that we might become living water for others; and "others" in the context of today's Gospel should be written in capital letters as we visualize that statement.

The desert areas of our world, our community, are those places and those people who are deprived of living water; deprived of the radical love of God that insists on equality and fairness and generosity.

Today's Gospel is so much God's word for our time and place. Everywhere we look, it seems, people define themselves as not "the Other." "I am a Quebecker, not a Canadian" say the radicals in the Parti Québécois. "Let them go," said 47% of the respondents in a recent newspaper poll. "I am not English" is the subtext of Scottish nationalism which will be measured in a referendum in Scotland in September.

We're going to partition ourselves from the Tamils, said the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. We're going to partition ourselves from the Palestinians, said the Israelis. When the Berlin Wall came down, two more popped up. This is the world we live in. We erect barriers, for whatever reason. There are a number that are economic. Think of the G7 meeting this week in the Hague. They have already distanced themselves from Russia. But what about all the other countries in the world. Every time the G7 or the G8 meet. What is that barrier? That barrier is economics. We the "have" nations will make decision for you the "have-not" nations. People live in gated communities. We want to separate ourselves, we say, from the riffraff. Sectarianism, racism, prejudice is not just something that existed in Jesus' day; not just something that existed between Jews and Samaritans. It's something that transcends time and place. It's part of the human condition.

Jesus comes to us at the well and says *become* the living water, *become* the gospel, *become* the drink that our parched world needs so that people can live together not as us fellows only; not as me and the other, but simply as the *children of God*.