

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: February 5, 2017
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“THE WATER”

John 4:4-18, 25-26, 39

{"Cool Water," Joni Mitchell}

**All day I face the barren waste
Without a taste of water
Cool water ...**

**With throats slate dry
Our spirits cry for water
Cool clear water**

Years ago, I was flipping through the TV channels and came across an image that burned itself into my brain: a group of scrawny, young boys crouched around a puddle, taking drinks. Some cupped their hands. Some put their faces in it. One filled a plastic bottle and took a swig.

The water was brown. Not clear brown, like tea; sludgy brown, like the water in a tub after you soak several pairs of mud-caked jeans in it.

Evidently, it also stank. When the reporter got a whiff of the stuff, he gagged.

The translator asked the boys how they could stand to drink it. One boy answered, **“When you get thirsty enough, you will drink anything.”**

People adrift on life rafts, stranded in the desert, and locked in death camps have said the same thing. If a person is desperately dehydrated, any available fluid will suffice: sea water, water with dead things in it, urine.

“When you get thirsty enough, you will drink anything.” The body demands hydration, and thirst is its **“cry for water.”**

Please turn to John 4. Jesus is passing through Samaria and stops to rest at Jacob’s well, just south of Sychar.

A Samaritan woman comes to draw water. His clothing identifies him as a Jew, so she says nothing.

■ To her astonishment, he breaks the silence.

“Will you give me a drink?” he asks in verse 7.

■ When the woman recovers from her shock enough to reply, she gets right to the point. Verse 9: **“You are Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?”**

The hatred and distrust between Jews and Samaritans is mutual. It is a toxic stew of ethnic pride, religious arrogance, and centuries-old political conflict. Jews and Samaritans do not mix.

Besides, he is male and she is female. Most men in these cultures don’t talk to their own wives and mothers in public, much less women they don’t know.

The Lord reaches out to her anyway. He includes her in his world. He affirms her human dignity. As we shall see, he is merciful to her. He freely gives her his time. He risks his reputation by initiating this conversation.

It is always wise to pay close attention to Messiah’s attitudes, words, and actions. The goal is not just to learn more *about* him; it is to become more *like* him.

? We are called Christians. In our social interactions, do we resemble the One whose name we bear?

? How might God affirm and critique our dealings with others, especially those who are quite different or hostile?

■ {Jn 4:10} Back to the narrative. Jesus replies, **“If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”**

📖 In a land with scant rainfall, **“living water”** is defined as water that flows fresh and pure from cold springs. This is in contrast to standing water that seeps into wells and collects in cistern. That is typically lukewarm, and frequently contaminated with dust and debris and bugs.

The Lord steers the dialogue in a spiritual direction. Yet the woman assumes he is talking about liquid H₂O, and responds accordingly.

■ Verses 11-12: **“Sir, you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?”**

■ Messiah continues to speak to her need. **“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again”** – physical thirst inevitably returns, no matter what we drink – **“but those who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life”** (verses 13-14).

■ {Jn 4:15} The woman persists in her materialist mindset: **“Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”**

■ Even so, she opens the door for further conversation and in verses 17-26 the Word made flesh walks through it:

“Go, call your husband and come back.”

She answers: **“I have no husband.”**

Then he does what no ordinary stranger can: he tells the woman the story of her life, in short form. **“You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is you, have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”**

Christ Jesus is not shaming her. His threefold goal is to reveal himself as God’s Anointed, to show that her efforts to slake her inward thirst are not working, and to invite her to receive abundant life.

☑ **All day I face the barren waste
Without a taste of water
Cool water ...
With throats slate dry
Our spirits cry for water
Cool clear water**

Try to see life through the eyes of the Samaritan woman. Why would she wed five men in sequence, then cohabit with another? For economic security, in part.

But are these unions strictly financial transactions? Isn’t she also searching for happiness? Doesn’t she expect – or at least hope for – fulfillment in her relationships?

The day in, day out irritations, hardships, ethical dilemmas, and spiritual battles desiccate the inner being. We crave refreshment.

‡ Isn't this dehydration a significant factor in all kinds of ills, mistakes, misjudgments, and sins? Addiction to entertainment and recreation, workaholism, materialism, compulsive eating, sexual immorality, substance abuse, false religion, and so forth are symptoms of dehydration.

“When you get thirsty enough, you will drink anything.” The soul “[cries] **for water / Cool clear water,**” and we pin our hopes on these things to satisfy us.

☑ {“Cool Water”} We are sadly mistaken:

**Keep on movin’ Dan
Some devils had a plan
Buried poison in the sand**

**Don’t drink it man
It’s in the water
Cool clear water**

{Pr 14:12; 16:25} Or, as Proverbs puts it in two separate places, **“There is a way that appears to be right, / but in the end it leads to death.”**

This the Samaritan woman’s predicament. Her soul is parched, and she has relied on her husbands (and now her partner) to quench her deepest needs – but she is still thirsty.

Let’s pause here and consider our alternatives in relation to the “woman at the well” in our world, people caught up in chronic sin.

★ We can stridently condemn them, casting stones of blame and shame, vociferously decrying their many iniquities, in order to impress upon them the full weight of their guilt.

★ We can quietly forsake them, leaving them to the fate they have brought on themselves, withdrawing from them lest we are judged guilty by association or worse, we catch whatever spiritual disease they have.

★ Or we can love them. We can connect with them, neither condemning them nor condoning their sin, yet caring for them in their sin. We can pray for them, do kind deeds for them, listen to them, and when the Holy Spirit prompts us we can talk with them about the living water.

Which alternative does the Savior choose?
Almost always the third one. He loves sinners.

There is a singular, notable exception: The Lord stoutly critiques the scribes and Pharisees. They are the one group he publicly denounces for deplorable behavior.

Why does he criticize them? They know the Scriptures, demand strict compliance with God’s Law, work hard to bring about moral reform, and assume that their obedience to the letter of Law proves their righteousness – when in fact they **“are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead ...”** (Matthew 23:27).

Christ censures those men, but not this woman at the well. Not the woman caught in adultery. Not Levi

and Zacchaeus and other notorious sinners. Jesus gently invites them to receive the water of life.

? Are we paying close attention to pay close attention to Messiah's attitudes, words, and actions? The goal is not just to learn more *about* him; it is to become more *like* him.

■ Not every thirsty sinner turns to him; but, praise God, the Samaritan woman does! John 4:25-26:

The woman [says], "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

... Jesus [declares], "I, the one speaking to you – I am he."

■ She believes and drinks the water of life. Her actions in verse 39 confirm it: **"Many of the Samaritans in that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony."**

**The shadows sway
They seem to say
Tonight we pray for water
Cool water**

**And way up there
If you care
Please show us where
There's good water
Cool clear water**

God the Son has come to lead us to water. He promises: **"those who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."**

John chapter 4 is the word of the Lord.