

Sermon – March 22, 2020
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: John 4:7-26

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry. Amen

Good Morning! Welcome to week two of the live stream from Afton UMC in beautiful downtown Ophelia, Virginia. We give thanks this morning for the wonderful band who has come and shared with us. We have kicked off a chat on Facebook and ask that you send us a comment to let us know that you have joined the live stream. You can also send prayer requests through that forum, and we will pick them up and add them to both our Sunday morning prayer time as well as prayers offered during the week.

Last week we looked at another section of scripture about Jesus' visit to the town of Sychar. You can find that sermon on the Afton Facebook page, and the print and audio will be up on both churches' websites. That sermon was a narrative from the view of the town of Sychar looking down the path to the well. Today, we are looking at another section of scripture about Jesus' visit to Sychar, his encounter with the woman at the well. We have moved from the town to the well in order to witness the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Listen or follow along in your Bibles as I read this morning's Gospel lesson. You can find this scripture in John 4:7-26.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The 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.) Jesus 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus 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.” The 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.” Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The 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!” The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus 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.” The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Jesus has stopped during his journey from the Jordan to Galilee at the well outside of the Samaritan town of Sychar to “rest” and he has sent all of his disciples to town to get food. It seems clear that Jesus wants to be alone, and so, what one or two disciples could have accomplished, all are sent to attend to, and Jesus waits alone by the well. It is noon, not the time for drawing water. Yet a Samaritan woman comes to the well with her empty jar. She must not be bothered by Jesus’ presence at the well. Perhaps she thinks that Jesus will simply not speak to her or he presents far less of an issue than what she normally experiences when she comes to the well when others from her town are present. She comes with her water jug to get water to sustain her life.

Jesus does not greet the woman, but asks her for a drink. Jesus’ request establishes a connection to the woman. She has come to draw water to meet her needs. Jesus starts a conversation with her by connecting his thirst - his need - with her need. They have a common need. Jesus becomes another person who is also thirsty for a drink.

The woman does not respond as Rebekah did many, many years ago when Abraham’s servant at another well asked for a drink and she quickly offered him a drink and to water his

camels. Instead, the Samaritan woman challenges Jesus, asking “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” It is far from the social norm for a Jew to share anything with a Samaritan, even a drink of water. This is the residue of centuries of conflict between the Jews and Samaritans. Jesus is breaking many social norms by talking to a woman, let alone being alone with a woman. These interactions are especially frowned upon for Jewish religious men. Yet Jesus has asked the Samaritan woman for a drink.

Jesus now moves to the next step in this encounter. He challenges the Samaritan woman to discover who he is and what he will give her if she will ask for it. She has recognized Jesus as a Jew and nothing more. He is asking her, challenging her, to find out who he is and what he can give her if she will ask him for it: living water. Living water in the Old Testament is water that flows and is not stagnate. The Samaritan woman may only hear the flowing aspect of living water in Jesus’ words and want that more desirable water. Notice as she addresses Jesus the second time, she changes her address to him from calling him a Jew to “sir.” She is beginning to think that he might be someone she should show respect for, or perhaps their common need for water opens her to a more respectful address.

Her change in address for this man at the well signals a first step down a path for her to discover who Jesus is. She is also curious about the living water and where Jesus might get it. Her mind is drawn to the water flowing into the well. But Jesus has no way to reach into the depths and get the water that lies some 100 feet below and give that to her. She also wonders if he could be greater than her ancestor Jacob who gave them this well. She is changing her understanding of who Jesus is and what the gift of God he offers might be. The living water must come from somewhere else besides the well is her conclusion.

She still calls Jesus “sir,” but next she compares Jesus to her ancestor Jacob, asking Jesus if he is “greater than the one who gave us water that allowed them and us to live?” Notice that when Jesus replies, he combines the two questions she is seeking to have answered: “Who he is and what is the gift of God he gives?” Jesus describes for her what living water is and tells her that he is the one who gives living water. The water Jacob gave from the well he dug only temporarily stops thirst; the gift that Jesus gives satisfies a different kind of thirst and springs up to give eternal life. When Jesus speaks to her of living water, he is offering eternal life. The Samaritan woman does not yet understand what the living water Jesus is talking about might be. We see in her response that she is still focused on the water that ends thirst so that she might not

need to come to the well ever again and draw water. In this exchange, the key is that she asks Jesus for this water. Her reason for asking may be incorrect, but she has asked to receive eternal life. She has asked for far more than she understands. She does not yet know who Jesus is, but water, living water, is very interesting.

With the woman's request for living water, Jesus moves the conversation forward in a new direction that will help her understand what living water is and who he is. Jesus asks her a life question, telling her to go and get her husband and that when he comes back with her, Jesus will give her living water. She may want the water, but she cannot carry out this action. She cannot comply because her life is too complicated, but she still wants to have this water. So, she is somewhat honest in her response, telling Jesus she has no husband. She has made a key decision by not leaving and never returning. She may be drawn by a hope for water that will end her trips to the well, but she tells Jesus that she has no husband, so she cannot go and call him. She cannot do what Jesus has asked. This is another key moment in this conversation for her, for she has revealed to this man at the well a little of her situation in life. Jesus has given her a chance to leave the well. She could have decided that Jesus was just another Jewish man and left the well without living water to return to who she has always been, but instead she gives the best answer she can in response to Jesus' request, in hopes that he might allow her another way to receive this living water.

What Jesus does in response to her answer is to reveal his prophetic nature to her by telling her everything she has ever done. He tells 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!" This is another key moment for the woman. Jesus has just revealed that he knows her, that he knows all she has ever done, and this revelation tells her that she is at least in the presence of a prophet, one who speaks for God. As a Samaritan, she only believes there is one prophet to come, a Messiah who will teach them everything. As a woman with no husband, she has just encountered a Jewish man who knows all that she has ever done. Such a revelation brings the woman to a difficult decision point. She must decide if she will stay with Jesus, a prophet of God, or turn and leave. She can move away from Jesus and the light and the truth that come with a prophet who speaks for God, or she can stay in the light and engage this prophet. The words of a prophet of God penetrate into one's soul. They are uncomfortable words. They are words of truth. They reveal pain, want, hurt, and anguish, and are words that cut deep into

our soul. The woman can reject Jesus' words and flee from truth, or she can stay and seek to discover who this is who speaks to the truth in her life. She decides to stay and see if this really is a prophet or just another Jewish man with keen insight. She seeks safe ground in this uncomfortable moment and moves the conversation to an old argument between the Jews and the Samaritans about where one should worship. Her move is to test to see if Jesus will act as a Jew or if he will act as one who speaks for God. She may expect him to verify what she holds about worship as a Samaritan. She may expect Jesus to respond as all the Jews she knows and insist that the place to worship is in Jerusalem at the Temple. She has taken a risky step to understand who Jesus is. She does not yet understand with whom she is talking, but she has proposed a key question that will give her more insight into the nature of this Jewish man at the well. Jesus does not respond along either of these lines about a right location for worship, nor does he argue about worship. Instead he reveals to her and to us the nature of worship. Jesus tells her, "The Father is worshiped neither on this mountain or in Jerusalem but in spirit and truth." The woman and the Samaritans worship God but they do not know Him. They have lost their knowledge of the one they seek to worship, mixing the one God with many who are not God, and so they worship a God they do not know. The Jews by contrast have clung to the law, and they still know of the God they worship and His steadfast love and as such they are the source of salvation. Jesus does not connect worship to a location, but to spirit and truth. In this manner of worship, anyone can approach God in worship from any place if they have the spirit and truth.

Jesus then makes a key revelation about God to the woman and to us as readers of John's Gospel, that God is spirit. God is not an image of things created but an invisible spirit. We are not to attempt to make an image of God, an image that does not exist, but we are to worship God as spirit and truth. The Father seeks those who will worship in spirit and truth. This is an invitation for the woman to worship, not as she has or as her ancestors did or as the Jews have, but to recognize that this prophet is the one who baptizes in Spirit and truth and is a guide to true worship. He is the one who gives living water to those who ask and enables those who receive living water to worship the Father in Spirit and truth. Jesus is teaching as one sent from God, but still, who he is, is unknown to the woman.

The Samaritan woman makes one last attempt to move the conversation to comfortable ground. She tries to put Jesus, who is teaching her and us about God, the Father, into a context she understands. She tries to define Jesus as the prophet that she and the Samaritans believe will

come as the Messiah who will teach them everything. The Samaritans believed that there was only one prophet, Moses, and that there is one yet to come who is not a deliverer from sin and death or even bondage to Rome, but a teacher, one who will teach all things. Jesus will not fit into her idea of a prophet. Jesus will not fit into our idea of a prophet. Instead, Jesus takes this opening to reveal who he is to this Samaritan woman with no husband, a woman at the well about whom he knows all that she has ever done. Jesus tells her he is "I am." These are the same words of God at the burning bush on another mountain given to Moses when Moses asks for the name of God and is told I AM. Jesus has just revealed to a Samaritan woman, whom he should not even be talking with, that he is the Messiah, God in the flesh, salvation for all people, not just the Jews but all who worship the Father in Spirit and truth. He is the giver of living water.

Does the woman at the well comprehend who Jesus is and what living water is? Maybe or maybe not, but she is convinced that he is a prophet who knows everything she ever did and he has told her he is the Messiah, that he is the "I AM." Her heart and broken spirit are changed with this news. She may believe that he is the Samaritan's confused idea of the prophet to come, but no matter. As Jesus' disciples arrive with food, she leaves behind her water jar and hurries to the town to tell everyone the great news she has heard from the man at the well.

Jesus waits for each of us by a well. He waits to ask us for a drink or a meal or a game of golf or fellowship in a time of loneliness or help in our brokenness. He knows us fully and loves us no matter what we have done. He offers us living water, eternal life. He waits for us to ask him for living water and for an opportunity to reveal to us who he is, the "I Am" God in the flesh. How do we understand living water and who Jesus is? For those of us who are inside the church, part of a body of believers, we have to ask ourselves, have we asked Jesus for living water? Have we come to realize that Jesus knows all that we have ever done and he loves us still? Do we understand the love of Jesus for us whom he fully knows? Jesus goes to the cross and dies for our sins because he loves us enough to pay our sin debts. Do we understand the depth of that love? Do our lives reflect that love? Are we going to tell others about our experience and bring them to encounter Jesus? We may have already encountered Jesus at our well, and he has asked us a question that has begun our walk towards learning who Jesus is and how we can come to have eternal life, a life reconciled to God the Father. Jesus was probably not thirsty when he asked the woman for a drink. Jesus speaks truth into her life but never condemns her for her past. Can we remember what question we were asked by Jesus that led us into a

deeper walk with him? Can we remember who spoke God into our lives? We as the body of Christ are to be asking those outside the church these same types of questions. We are to be those who see our neighbors at the well and ask them for a drink of water. Our desire is not to have our thirst quenched, but to help them understand who Jesus is and what it means to receive living water. Our response to Jesus is to seek others whom we can meet at their well and help them encounter the Messiah, the savior of the world. We are to invite them to receive living water, water that becomes a spring gushing up to eternal life.

Pray with me: Father guide us to the well where we may encounter your son. Help us to understand who he is and to ask him for living water, water that springs up to eternal life. Guide us in the power of the Holy Spirit to ask others for a drink, even if we are not thirsty, so that we might begin a journey with them to a knowledge of who Jesus is and the gift of God. Amen

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Go forth into Jesus' mission to meet our neighbors at a well.