



THE RIVER OF LIFE

Catalog No. 1348

John 4:27-42

Tenth Message

John Hanneman

March 21st, 2004

Ponce de Leon sailed with Columbus and became the governor of Haiti. He conquered Puerto Rico and became governor of that island. But the thing we remember most about this Spaniard is his search for the fountain of youth. In the Middle Ages, the world was filled with legends of the existence of a spring that would make old people young and heal all kinds of sickness. In 1513, Ponce de Leon arrived in Florida to search for this fountain. But eight years later he died. He never found the water that he hoped would restore his youth.

All of humanity is searching for a life-giving fountain that will satisfy their deep thirst. In chapter 4 of John's gospel we discover that this fountain is not imaginary, it's real. The life-giving fountain that everyone is looking for is Jesus, and the water is the Holy Spirit.

In our last study we looked at Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. Jesus offered her a drink of living water, and she became a worshiper of God "in spirit and truth." This morning we will look at the woman's response to that encounter, the response of the disciples, and the response of the people of the village. John interweaves the three responses in an interesting way.

At this point His disciples came, and they were amazed that He had been speaking with a woman, yet no one said, "What do You seek?" or, "Why do You speak with her?" (John 4:27 NASB)

The disciples return from the city of Sychar, to which they had left earlier to buy food. Jesus, wearied by his travels, stayed behind at the well. The disciples are amazed to find him speaking with a Samaritan woman. Jews and Samaritans kept their distance from each other. The Jews believed that any interaction with a Samaritan would make them unclean and defiled. Further, the prevailing attitude among the Jews was that it was a waste of time for a rabbi to talk with a woman, even his own wife. They considered that a distraction from studying Torah. But Jesus breaks every social and cultural barrier. The speechless disciples, who probably were annoyed, have no questions for Jesus or the woman.

I can relate to the disciples. With my German background, schedules and efficiency are what matter most. My wife, however, is quite unpredictable. She has an uncanny ability to spontaneously engage the most unlikely of people in conversation. For her, that is pure delight; for me it is sometimes an annoyance. I have places to go and people to see. That was the attitude of the disciples on this occasion.

So the woman left her waterpot, and went into the city and said to the men, "Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Christ, is it?" They went out of the city, and were coming to Him. (4:28-30)

The woman responds by running into town and telling everyone what had happened at the well. Two things are striking here. First, she left her waterpot. This is symbolic of her leaving the water from below, the water of Jacob's well, and embracing the water from above, the living water of Jesus, which is the Spirit of God. She abandons the old forms of religion in favor of worshiping God in spirit and truth. Her focus is now on the fact that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One.

What a contrast with Nicodemus, who was unwilling to leave the old categories behind, at least at this point in the story. (He does come around later, as we will see.) Following Christ demands that we must leave something behind. If we are religious but do not have a relationship with God, we have to leave behind the spiritual pride and religious traditions that make us feel good about ourselves. If we are worldly, we have to leave behind the attachments that we have come to depend on. In either case we have to abandon the things we have relied upon to satisfy our thirst. These idols stand in the way of our relationship with Jesus. This demands courage, because at times we will face rejection from family and friends.

Secondly, when we recall the woman's status in the village (she was an outcast), it's amazing that she spoke to the men. Daily she was made to feel shame and guilt by the very men to whom she now speaks about Jesus. Women feel guilt and shame much more deeply than men, especially when it comes to issues of moral failures, or any failure for that matter. A woman with a past has a much greater sense of unworthiness. This Samaritan woman would have avoided anyone who reminded her of her shame. But now she is bearing witness to the very people she had avoided in the past.

We see reflected in her actions the compassion of Jesus. The Lord was deeply compassionate toward everyone, especially women who had made a mess of their lives. He did not see them as used, tainted or second-class. Neither should we. Through Jesus' compassion, women were freed from guilt and shame and given a sense of worth. The most effective women in ministry are those who have received that kind of compassion

from the Lord.

As the scene changes, the action returns to Jesus. The disciples need an attitude adjustment; some instruction is in order.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging Him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples were saying to one another, "No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work." (4:31-34)

The disciples urge Jesus to eat. They are focused on physical food. Jesus responds by saying that he has food they don't know about. They wonder who gave him that food, and what could be better than the food they had got in town. They respond just like the woman: their thoughts are on physical water and physical food. Jesus expands on his explanation by saying that his food is to do the will of the Father. This will come up again in chapter 6, when Jesus talks about the bread of life.

Jesus was sent by the Father to do the Father's will. His works were the works of God. That was his food. That was what nourished and sustained him. Doing the Father's will, in this case with the Samaritan woman, gave him greater sustenance and satisfaction than any food the disciples could offer. Jesus' mission was what defined his life. He lived by eating the bread of God's will.

Do we know that food? Does it nourish our lives? Our sense of calling should permeate everything we do. Jesus had a clear vision of who he was and what he was to be about. This is what sustained him. We need that same sense of calling. We are not referring to career or position or family, but about having a higher purpose. This is what transforms an ordinary life into a one filled with purpose, even though it consists of doing ordinary things. This is what sustains us and satisfies us—doing the will of the Father. The book of Deuteronomy says: "He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD" (Deut 8:3).

Jesus goes on to expand on what he has said, defining for the disciples the works of the Father, which are reaping and sowing.

"Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest. Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. For in this case the saying is true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have

entered into their labor." (4:35-38)

Some scholars argue that John is trying to ease tension between the Hellenists, the Samaritans, and the Jerusalem church. Others speculate that there was an influx of Samaritans into the Johannine community. Yet others think that verse 35 is a proverb. But there is nothing to substantiate these claims. Jesus is talking about farming: tilling the soil, planting seeds, watering the crops and harvesting fruit. He is referring to sowing the word of God and reaping the fruit that grows in people's lives. As disciples, we are all farmers working in the fields of God's creation.

Jesus says several things about farming.

1. There is no delay between sowing and reaping.

The disciples don't have to wait four months before the crops come in. The gospel is available to all. The harvest is ready. The time of waiting is over. The woman and the people of the Samaritan village attest to this truth. The messianic age, a time of prosperity, fertility and abundance, has begun.

"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD,
"When the plowman will overtake the reaper
And the treader of grapes him who sows seed;
When the mountains will drip sweet wine
And all the hills will be dissolved." (Amos 9:13)

2. The fruit of the harvest is eternal life.

We are not concerned merely for our own spiritual life; we are gathering fruit for eternal life. We offer living water to a thirsty world. Jesus left the disciples to continue the works of the Father, the same mission that is now given to us.

3. The work of the harvest causes the sower and the reaper to rejoice together.

Restore our captivity, O LORD,
As the streams in the South.
Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting.
He who goes to and fro weeping, carrying his bag of seed,
Shall indeed come again with a shout of joy, bringing his sheaves with him. (Ps 126:4-6)

Here we see that even seeds sown in struggle can be reaped with joy.

You shall multiply the nation,
You shall increase their gladness;
They will be glad in Your presence
As with the gladness of harvest,
As men rejoice when they divide the spoil. (Isa 9:3)

Nothing gives the farmer greater delight than bringing in the harvest. Such is the joy that fills us when we do the Father's work and see the life of God take root in someone's heart. The wages are the joy of the harvest for both the reaper and sower.

4. The disciples are invited to join in the harvest which others have prepared.

The words “in this” in verse 37 look forward to verse 38. The “others” could be a reference to John the Baptist, but it is probably a reference to Jesus as well as all those, including the prophets, who came before, preparing the way of the Lord. The disciples will be fruitful, but their fruitfulness will be made possible because of the work of others before them. Philip reaped what he did not sow when he visited this same area (Acts 8).

5. The work of both sowing and reaping are essential.

The sower labors in anticipation of what is to come. The reaper must never forget that the harvest he enjoys is the fruit of another’s toil. Success in reaping normally depends on the work of those who have gone before. We must never think that our part is too insignificant or too important. When sowing and reaping go hand in hand, it is but a foretaste of the eschatological blessings still to come.

God’s spirit is breaking out all over the world, as it was that day in Samaria. He is in the process of reaping fruit for eternal life. As his disciples, our task is to learn how to farm. Do we believe that the fields are white for harvest? Do we want to enter into the work of the Father and the joy of the Father? Or do we just care about our own comfort? If we only seek our own comfort, then we go from meal to meal and event to event without a higher calling.

From that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, “He told me all the things that I have done.” So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. Many more believed because of His word; and they were saying to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world.” (4:39-42)

Following Jesus’ teaching about the harvest, the disciples witness the ingathering as the Samaritans believe in him. Initially they believe, based on the testimony of the woman, but later they believe because of the word of Jesus himself. The fact that they ask him to stay with them attests to the confidence and faith they had in him.

The Samaritans call Jesus “Savior of the world.” Here is another interesting title given to Jesus in John’s gospel, one with all kinds of possibilities. This term was used for Greek deities such as Zeus. Further, “savior of the world” was a term used for the Caesar. It was the title given to Hadrian, the Roman emperor. Perhaps John is saying that the real savior of the world is not Zeus or the Roman emperor, but the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Also, since Jesus is a Jew, and the ones who believe are Samaritans, John is saying that salvation is from the Jews but not just for the Jews. Salvation is for the world, for everyone.

John 4 is the realization of the vision of Ezekiel 47, in which water flows from under the altar and becomes a mighty river.

Then he brought me back to the door of the house; and behold, water was flowing from under the threshold of the house toward the east, for the house faced east. And the water was flowing down from under, from the right side of the house, from south of the altar. (Ezek 47:1)

As measures are taken of the depth of the water, it first comes up to the ankles, then to the knees, then to the loins, and finally becomes a river that cannot be forded.

He said to me, “Son of man, have you seen this?” Then he brought me back to the bank of the river. (Ezek 47:6)

And wherever the river flows there is life and whatever it touches lives.

“It will come about that every living creature which swarms in every place where the river goes, will live. And there will be very many fish, for these waters go there and the others become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes...By the river on its bank, on one side and on the other, will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither and their fruit will not fail. They will bear every month because their water flows from the sanctuary, and their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing.” (Ezek 47:9, 12)

This is exactly what is happening in John 4. Jesus is the new temple, the holy place, the new locus of worship. From him springs forth living water. The Samaritan woman drinks of this water and finds life, and then she runs to the village to share her story. The image is that of a river flowing into the village. Everywhere the water flows there is life. What started with the woman becomes a river of life.

This is what the church is designed to be—a river of life. God dwells in the church, in our lives, through the Holy Spirit. Our bodies are temples of the living God. We worship through Jesus in spirit and truth. The same thing that happened in Sychar can happen, and should happen, right now through the church. From the church should flow the river of life, out into the community, into our workplaces, into our neighborhoods, so that everything that the water touches can live. This is the food that sustains the church. If this doesn’t give us a sense of our calling, nothing will!

Water is not a solid, it is liquid. Water flows, it is flexible, it goes everywhere. This is what we discover when a pipe bursts in the yard, when a drain clogs or a river overflows its banks. Water seeps under doorways, finding every crack and filling up every hole. It goes places where nothing else can. And it always finds the lowest point. In this case it was Samaria. That is the work of the Spirit, flowing from the church. It finds cracks in

people's hearts, openings that we never knew about, and people drink and find life.

Nikki is a member of our Twenty Something singles group. She shared her story here in church last Easter. Nikki is the Samaritan woman. Formerly she was enslaved in a very dark lifestyle. She was isolated in shame and guilt. One day, some water from this church flowed into Starbucks, where Nikki worked. Instead of coffee, some women in this church offered her living water. She left her waterpot behind and began to follow Jesus. Now she is a river of life. A group of us are taking a missions trip next month, and Nikki has organized over forty prayer partners to support us. We're not going to the Yucatan for ministry this spring, but that doesn't stop Nikki; she is organizing a trip for next August. A few months ago, Nikki brought a former friend to this church to meet you, so that her friend might see Jesus. Nikki graces our life. She is a gift to us, just like the Samaritan woman was a gift to Sychar. Will we join in the harvest? Will we jump in the river and start flowing?

I will end by sharing some thoughts about witness and testimony.

1. Never underestimate the testimony of one person.

The witness of ordinary human beings ought never to be despised. One willing person can do amazing things. One drop of living water can go a long way.

2. We can trust that Jesus will reveal himself to people as we share our story.

All we have to do is give witness to what Jesus has done for us. In this story, the woman merely told the people of the village what had happened to her. That is all we need to do: just tell our story. We don't have to manipulate or control people. We need only reveal what we know, and trust that God will do the rest.

3. Oftentimes the best evangelists are young Christians.

Life begets life. New believers are a joy to be around because they're always talking about Jesus. What a contrast the Samaritan woman is to Nicodemus, who prided himself on being a religious leader.

I grew up in a church, but I didn't have a relationship with God. When I became a Christian at the end of my college days, the first thing I wanted to do was go back to that church and tell everyone what I had found. And I did. With bold abandonment I visited the college group and shared what had happened to me. This is our natural response when we come to faith—to run into the village and tell and everyone.

4. A church will begin to atrophy if new life does not break forth.

If the water ceases to flow, the riverbed dries up. The church becomes introspective and stale. The focus turns inward. The concerns center on who is doing what, whether things are being done the right way, and maintaining proper order. People are taken to the dried-out riverbed and are told about the time when the river of life flowed. But this never brings life. The cure for this is to look outward and join in what the Spirit of God is doing. Each person and each generation has to drink from the fountain of life for themselves.

This is not a matter of whipping up evangelistic zeal. It's a question of entering into the work of the Father as we travel from Jerusalem, to Galilee, through Samaria. If you think you have a messed-up life, you too can be a gift. A messed-up, hopeless life can become a river of life. How will we respond? We can stand on the bank and watch, or we can jump in and get wet. Let's jump in!

© 2004 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino