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John 4:1-42

Seventh Message

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# BROKEN WELLS AND THIRSTY PEOPLE

*SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE*

We have all been touched by the rioting and the chaos of the past few days. In Los Angeles alone, more than 40 people have been killed and 5,000 injured. Three thousand buildings were burned, and over 200 millions dollar of damage done. The television images of the death and destruction evoked a multitude of emotions. We watched as an innocent man was dragged out of his truck and mercilessly beaten. We saw hundreds of people stealing and looting, grinning at the cameras, their arms laden with clothes, food, jewelry, shoes, whatever they could carry. The chaos reminded us once more that there is a problem with humanity. Something is wrong with us. The apostle Paul's diagnosis of the human condition has never seemed more relevant: "People are lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God..." (2 Tim. 3:2-4).

Can there be any doubt that it is our own depravity that causes pain to ourselves and to others? We came into this world with a proclivity for doing wrong. We are like a baseball with a spin on it: sooner or later we break, and invariably the break is down and out. We suffer from the problem of misdirected love: we love ourselves rather than God.

But we are often blind to our own selfishness. I have talked to some people in the last few days who are inclined to think they are exceptions. They portrayed themselves as leaning more toward righteousness, and they expressed amazement at what they saw on television. I don't think we have plumbed the depths of our depravity, and the evil we are capable of. As I watched those senseless killings, I saw my own anger. As I watched the looting, I was confronted with my own lust for things, which often goes unchecked. George MacDonald said, "Foolish is the man, and there are many such men, who would rid himself or his fellows of discomfort by setting the world right, by raging war on the evils around him, while he neglects that integral part of the world where lies his business, his first business—namely his own character and conduct."

God often concedes to our sin. He allows us to duplicate Adam's fall so we can come to know the dark stuff of which we are made. It is during crises like these that we ourselves come to see what he sees all along.

My concern in preaching on this story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well is that I am afraid I will ruin it, for this account is so powerful we could read it almost without comment. But then, what would we do with the remaining 35 minutes of our service? So I will make some comments on the story as we read it together.

The story of Jesus and the woman at the well of Samaria teaches us how the church is to respond to racial prejudice. In this story, Jesus crosses the barrier of race prejudice and interacts with the Samaritans, a race hated and rejected by the Jews. There can hardly be a greater contrast between two people than Nicodemus, the Jew who came to Jesus by night, and this Samaritan woman, who met Jesus at high noon by the well of Samaria. Nicodemus was an extremely important and sophisti-

cated man, an aristocrat. The Samaritan woman was unnamed and a nobody. He was a Jew. She was a Samaritan. He was a Pharisee. She had no religious affiliation. He was a scholar. She was uneducated. He was highly moral. She was immoral. He was a man. She was a woman. He came at night, to protect his reputation. She had no reputation to protect, so she came at noon. Two vastly different persons, but both suffered from the same malady.

The first three verses of John chapter 4, which form one long sentence in Greek, introduce this story.

**When therefore the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were), He left [or forsook] Judea, and departed again into Galilee.**

The Pharisees were keeping an eye on Jesus. They were wary of him since he had cleansed the temple. They saw large numbers of people leaving John the Baptist and gathering around him, and this concerned them. Jesus could see the storm clouds brewing, and, as he always did, he avoided unnecessary controversy and fled Judea. He had more important things to do than arguing with the Pharisees.

**(4:4) And He had to pass through Samaria.**

He "had" to pass through Samaria. In order to get from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, Jesus had to pass through Samaria, which lay right in the middle, what we call the West Bank today. (It actually extends beyond that but we identify it that way.) Samaria was right in the middle of the land. The most direct route from Judea to Galilee went straight through Samaria, but the Jews would not take that road. They hated the Samaritans, and their deep prejudice made them take a much longer journey. They preferred to traverse a hot, uncomfortable road, from Jerusalem across to Jericho, and up the Jordan Valley—almost twice the distance. Their prejudice was costly to them, but they felt it was worth it. But Jesus is not a racist. He cuts through that ignorant, narrow-minded prejudice and goes through Samaria.

John continues:

**(4:5) So He came to a city of Samaria, called Sychar, near the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph; and Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied from His journey, was sitting thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour [noon]. There came a woman of Samaria to draw water.**

Our Lord has been on the road about a half a day. He and his disciples have been travelling by foot, and they have covered 15 to 18 miles. Wary from walking, Jesus stops to rest beside Jacob's well, while the disciples go into the city to buy food. It was now midday, and very hot. He sits down, his thirst growing by the moment, but he has nothing to draw water with.

While he is sitting there on the rim of the well, a woman of Samaria comes out to draw water. He immediately is aware that something is wrong with this picture. In those days, women did not come at noon to draw water. This was a task that

was done in the evening, when things cooled off a bit. Her coming at noon gave a clue about her reputation, and this was not lost on Jesus. Women came at dawn, a cooler, more comfortable hour, to do this task. And they came not only to draw water, but to take off their veils and slip out from under the thumb of their male-dominated society. They came for companionship, to socialize, to talk and laugh. But this woman obviously was not welcome among them, so she comes alone, at noon, to avoid the searching stares of her more reputable peers. She was an outcast. She was probably an attractive woman and as such caused a degree of uneasiness in other women. She had a bad reputation. She knew that the other women would avoid her if she came at night, so to save herself humiliation she made the long trek, all alone, in the middle of the day, in the searing heat.

Like Jesus, she too is weary, not so much from the weight of the water jar she carries on her head, as from the emptiness she carries in her heart. Jesus is sitting right on the rim of the well, so she must come embarrassingly close to him to draw water. She is uneasy, but Jesus breaks the tension and the silence by asking her a question.

**(4:7b) Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.**

That sounds a trifle rude in our culture, but if it were today, I am sure Jesus would have said, "May I please have a drink of water?" He is acutely aware of this woman's needs. It was evident in her eyes, those fountains that mirrored her soul. He saw her guilt. He read those accusing thoughts that were her constant companions. Furthermore, Jesus is a prophet. The Father revealed things to him so that he could see into her heart and understand her. No wonder she was surprised at his request. This Jewish man, in the prime of life, around thirty years old, simply and humbly asks her for a drink of water. He has nothing to draw with, and the well is at least 100 feet deep. She is shocked!

Notice her guarded response.

**(4:9) The Samaritan woman therefore said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)**

It is probably safe to say that never before in her life had she been addressed by a Jewish man in any setting. And life had taught her to be wary of men who are too friendly, too fast.

In Jesus' day, women were an oppressed minority. They were demeaned by men. They were thought of as sub-human. They had very little rights. A woman had no worth apart from a man. It was a man's world. That was true not only in Jewish society but throughout the Ancient Near East.

Furthermore, as we said earlier, Jews would have nothing to do with Samaritans. They were deeply prejudiced against them. They didn't drink with them. That is the idea behind this explanatory phrase in v. 9. It literally means that they didn't use dishes that the Samaritans used. A Jew would never have accepted a cup of water from the hand of a Samaritan. That is why the woman is so shocked.

But Jesus was never conditioned by his culture. He wasn't racist or a sexist. He loved and respected women. He humbly and openly speaks to her in a public place. It would be amazing enough for a Jew to even speak to a Samaritan, but for a Jewish man to speak to a Samaritan woman was unheard of. This young rabbi, however, shares his need. What divine genius! In one sentence he breaks strong cultural and religious barriers, and at the same time opens a heart by expressing his basic need. Jesus responds to this woman in the same way he responded to Nicodemus on another occasion. He takes a physical element to express a deep spiritual truth, in a mysterious way.

**(4:10) Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."**

By "living" water he means fresh, running water in contrast to still water. The wells in those days were reservoirs. They were usually plastered with lime on the inside, and they held rain water or ground water. But the water wasn't fresh; it was often stagnant. There were very few running streams or springs in Palestine. Jesus is playing on this contrast between a reservoir and a spring. He is not teasing this woman, but taking her to deeper level, as he did Nicodemus. He tells her that if she knew who she was talking to, she would get her request in first and she would ask for living water.

**(4:11) She said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep; where then do You get that living water?"**

"How do you get this water?" is her question to Jesus. "This well is deep (about 100 feet)," she explains, "and you don't have a bucket or a rope. Where do you get this living water." She is thinking of a spring: "Where do you get this artesian water?" she is asking. We are used to modern plumbing, of course. We don't have to walk half a mile to a well in the heat of the day to get water. We just turn on a faucet and there is water. She is thinking, "My, it would be nice to have that kind of plumbing. I could just step outside the house and there would be water. I wouldn't have to come down here every day."

**(4:12) "You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself, and his sons, and his cattle?" Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water shall thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life."**

Jesus takes her from the symbol to the reality. He shares with her three things about this wonderful gift he is about to give her. First, the water he is referring to is a gift. "You don't have to look for it," says Jesus, "you don't have to dig in the ground for it. It comes from me. I will give it to you." Secondly, the water he would give her was like an artesian spring, not one of those plastered wells where the water became stagnant after a while. It was always fresh, always available, always on tap. And lastly, he says, "The water I am speaking about is not in the ground." He tells her that it is inside her: "The water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life. You don't even have to walk outside to tap into this spring. It's in your heart." He was talking about another kind of water, not the kind that sustains physical life, but the kind that produces eternal life.

That term "living water" is used frequently in the OT. As Jesus looked into the eyes of this Samaritan woman I am sure he recalled the words of the prophet Jeremiah. In the second chapter of Jeremiah, God is speaking to the prophet. Listen to his description of what he saw when he looked deeply into the hearts of his people during a time in their history when they were slipping far away from him:

**(2:13) "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."**

They had rejected the fresh, running supply of God and his grace, the inexhaustible resource of God's life and power, choosing instead the stagnant waters from the cracked cisterns they had built themselves.

These are the same two observations that Jesus made as he looked into the eyes of the Samaritan woman. First, *people are thirsty*. We all long for what God has designed for us to enjoy: tension-free relationships, filled with deep, loving acceptance,

and opportunities to make a difference to someone else. That thirst is in all of us. It was put there by God! It is part of the dignity our our humanity that is made in the image of God. We long for a quality of relationship and meaning that no other creature has the capacity to enjoy. But secondly, in response to their thirst, *people move in the wrong direction*. They refuse to trust God to satisfy their thirst. Instead, they insist on maintaining control, on finding their own satisfaction. We are all determined to satisfy the longings of our hearts by picking up a shovel, looking for a likely spot to dig, and searching for whatever fulfillment we can generate. We want to run our own lives.

The Scriptures consistently expose people as both thirsty and foolish. We long for the satisfaction we were created to enjoy, but we all, without exception, move away from God to find it. I would venture to say that if we could look inside our hearts this morning, many of us would uncover these two elements: thirst—deep longings for what we don't have, for relationships, intimacy, and acceptance; and stubborn independence, reflected in our wrong strategies for finding the life we desire. The longings reveal our *dignity*; the foolish strategies, our *depravity*.

We know from chapter 7 that the living water Jesus is speaking about here is the Holy Spirit, that gift of God that is promised to every believer: Someone to live within us at all times, wherever we go. It was the kind of intimacy that this woman had wanted all her life.

At this point she begins to see that her whole life had been spent digging wells, trying to quench her own thirst, and coming up dry. She had spent her years looking for someone to meet her needs and love her, someone who would give her significance and worth.

**(4:15) The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty, nor come all the way here to draw. [Her heart is willing to receive, but there is a barrier to her reception of this water.] Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." The woman answered and said, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You have well said, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; this you have said truly."**

Jesus needs to help her to see that she is living a dream. Though it is true that she is thirsty, she has taken it upon herself to quench that thirst. She has taken her own shovel and tried to dig for water. She has been looking for love in all the wrong places. There are no princes who will come along and make her world right. There are only frogs—and no matter how many times you kiss them, frogs will never become princes. And so Jesus brings her pain to the surface—the pain of her unfulfilled longings. It has to be brought to the surface so that the thirst can be felt.

The reason we don't thirst after God is because we have quenched our dryness by other means. We have developed strategies to protect us from the pain of unfulfilled longings and deep disappointments. We try and pretend the pain isn't too bad after all. All compulsive sin could be said to be strategies to protect us from the pain of unfulfilled longings. This is why compulsive sin has such a grip on people: because it takes away the pain—temporarily, of course, for it is an empty well.

A year and a half ago, I faced a crisis in my marriage. God had to bring my pain to the surface and show me how self-protective I was, how blind I was to my own selfishness, my inability to allow anything—even him—to satisfy me. God raised the threshold of my pain to get my attention.

During the Mexicali ministry a couple of weeks ago, we had a special service one evening to share about painful relationships that have had a grip on our lives and were holding us

back from being the people God wanted us to be. It was one of the most powerful services I have been involved in. Many students talked about their painful backgrounds and damaged relationships at home. I do not have words to describe the pain that was shared. After the meeting, one young man stood around for about ten minutes before he drummed up the courage to tell me of his longings for a father who was never there. He told me of his confusion regarding his own sexual identity, his homosexual practices which had gone on for four years with a high school teacher. God brought this boy's pain to the surface so that he could deal with it.

And that is what Jesus does with this dear woman at the well. She had gone from marriage to marriage, looking for someone to meet her needs. Finally, she gave up on marriage. She came to the conclusion that it was hopeless, and she was living with a man. That is accepted in our society, but in those days it was not accepted. She had lost all hope. She longed for someone to love her, and so she was willing to live in humiliation, to be ostracized, just to have a man around.

**(4:19) The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet."**

Certainly Jesus was a prophet. He had unveiled her life. He had seen something in her heart that no one else had ever seen. This was a supernatural revelation from the Father: "You are undoubtedly a prophet."

**(4:20) "Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you [people] say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."**

Most of the commentators take her remark to be an evasion, an attempt to escape Jesus' probing question, but I don't think so. I feel it is her way of asking for help. She agrees with his assessment of her life. Ten minutes before this she had never been spoken to by a Jewish man; now one she had never seen comes along and reveals the most intimate details of her life. She is convinced that he is a prophet, and she looks to him for help. I think at this point she begins to realize that what she was really looking for, what she was thirsting for all of her life, was God. She was asking, "Where do I get this life? You Jews say that the only place to offer the sacrifice that can cleanse my sin is in Jerusalem. Our people say it is here on this mountain? Where do I go to be cleansed? How do I find God?"

That is what we need to see as well. That deep thirst in her heart, that longing for something more, is not a hunger for another man or another woman. It is a thirst that only God can satisfy, what Pascal called that "God-shaped vacuum that only God can fill." That was what she was really thirsting for. It wasn't a diversion at all. She wanted to know how she could know God.

Listen to Jesus' response:

**(4:21) Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father. You worship that which you do not know; we worship that which we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."**

First of all, Jesus gently corrects her ignorance. "Your worship is wrong. It is through the Jews that the seed would come, the one who was promised from the beginning, the one who would bring salvation to the world, the one who would set things right. It is from the Jews that the oracles of God have come. You Samaritans are wrong."

In the 6th century, when the Jews were rebuilding their temple, the Samaritans came down and wanted to help in the project, but the Jews wouldn't let them because their worship was

corrupt. The Samaritans went back and built their own version of the temple, and they worshiped up there. They took the OT and cut it up into little pieces and took out portions that talked about worship in Jerusalem. Then eventually ended up with only the first five books of the Bible.

But Jesus says that the important question is not *where* people worship God but *how* they worship him. The hour is coming, and now is, when geography will no longer be an issue. Temples or buildings will no longer be necessary to worship God. By his death and resurrection, all those symbols of worship would be made irrelevant. He would send his Holy Spirit to live within our bodies, which would become the true temple, and we could meet with him anywhere, on the "holy ground" of our hearts.

If you want to know God, he will come to live in your heart. God is spirit. You have a spirit. And the God who is Spirit will come and live in your spirit. That is where you worship him: in your heart, in your innermost being.

And, said Jesus, you must worship him "in truth," that is, in reality. All of these temples and tabernacles that God had his people make were mere illustrations, patterns, symbols. They were shadows of the greater reality of the time that was coming when man could worship God right in his heart. "That is what will satisfy you," said Jesus. "That is what your heart has been hungering for all along. You thought it was a man, but it wasn't." And an important part of that, Jesus declares, is understanding God as Father. Jesus habitually spoke of God as his Father and he taught his disciples to do the same.

**(4:25) The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us."**

There comes a dawning realization in this woman's mind of who Jesus is. The Samaritans believed in a Messiah as well as the Jews. So does everyone else. That is why we have movies about super-heroes: it is because we are looking for that perfect someone, the Messiah, the one who will explain life to us, the one who will come and set things right. That is what we are looking for.

Notice what Jesus said. He did not say this to any of the theologians in Jerusalem. He didn't say this to his disciples. He didn't say this to anyone until the last week of his life.

**(4:26) Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am [He.]"**

Doesn't that give you goose bumps? How much clearer can you get? How unequivocal can you be? Maybe some of you listening to me this morning are Jewish; you are still looking for the Messiah to come. Listen to Jesus' words. The woman said, "I know the Messiah is coming." And Jesus responds, "I who speak to you am he." How clear can you be!

**(4:27) And at this point His disciples came, and they marveled that He had been speaking with a woman; yet no one said, "What do You seek?" or, "Why do You speak with her?"**

They had already grown accustomed to Jesus doing unusual things, breaking with convention, etc. They didn't say anything, though they must have been amazed that he was speaking with a Samaritan woman.

**(4:28) So the woman left her water pot, and went into the city, and said to the men,...**

What great detail John includes in this story. There are no throwaway lines in this gospel. Who needs a water pot when you have a spring flooding your heart! John was one of the six disciples standing there, watching everything. Later she realized that what had happened was significant. Sure she left her water pot in her excitement. But I think this is symbolic: she didn't need a water pot anymore. She had found the fountain of life.

Notice what she does when she returns to the city.

**(4:28) So the woman left her water pot, 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?"**

She goes back and tells the men because they are the only friends she has. She didn't have any woman friends. They were all afraid of her. Though she is not positive, there is a growing consciousness that this is the man she had been looking for all her life. "Come," she says, "see this man who told me everything I have ever done: the adulteries, the affairs, the abortions, the flirtations, the unclean thoughts. He knows it all." When Jesus exposes us, he doesn't condemn us; he cleanses us. He didn't open her up in order to leave her embarrassed and ashamed. He opened her up to heal her. But he didn't use a butcher's knife; he used the scalpel of a loving surgeon.

That is what Jesus does. He knows everything we have ever done. He knows everything we have ever thought of doing—and he loves us anyway. He loved this Samaritan woman. He saw her just as she was, yet he wasn't put off by her. Everyone else had either rejected her or sought to use her, but not Jesus. He patiently sat on the well and led her from what she thought was a thirst for water to the profound realization that her real thirst was not for a man, but for God himself. And the Lord had come to meet that need. He found her! He told her that the Father was looking for people to worship him, and the Father had seen the hunger of her heart. Though she was a terribly mixed-up woman, he had seen that what drove her inside was a hunger for something more. She thirsted for God. God saw that, and he directed his Son to a well in Samaria to tell her what she was really looking for. That was why Jesus had to go to Samaria.

If there are women here who are looking for a man, and you haven't found him yet, Jesus is seeking you. He is sitting on the rim of your well, waiting for you. He has been looking for you all your life. He longs to quench that thirst that no one else can quench. I invite you to let him come close, to let him feel the deep disappointment you feel.

Maybe you feel utterly hopeless and you have given up on ever having a relationship that is warm and intimate. You are filled with guilt and frustration. Perhaps you have come to that well often in the past and you are tired of going home empty-handed. I have good news for you: Jesus wants to give you a spring of water that will well up inside you to deeply satisfy you. He will give you the capacity to love.

Perhaps you are numb and you have lost the capacity to feel. Here is the good news for you: God can restore those feelings that have been buried. He can give you hope today, as he gave hope to the Samaritan woman two thousand years ago.

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