



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

## Living Water

St. John 4:10-15

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Have you ever flown over the Prairies or the Great Plains? When you look down you can see a patchwork of squares and circles where farmers are irrigating the soil and growing their crops. It's especially dramatic when you've just flown over a desert. Last year when I flew to General Council I had a layover in Phoenix. Once you get to the other side of the mountains you're flying mostly over semi-arid territory, but by the time you get to Arizona it's barren desert. As we left Phoenix on the flight to Dallas we flew over hundreds of miles of desert in Arizona and New Mexico, but as you start getting into Texas the patchwork of squares and circles appears again. In places you can see the aqueducts and irrigation canals that deliver the water from the far-away rivers to the fields. It's a reminder that life requires water. There's a spiritual metaphor there. I've said many times that God's Word is our source of life. He spoke Creation into being by his Word. He communicates with us and gives us life through his Written Word. Ultimately he gives us new and eternal life through the gift of his own Son, the Word Incarnate. Without him our lives are spiritual deserts. Nothing grows. Everything is dead. And yet when he pours himself into us he gives us life the way those irrigation canals bring life to the desert.

This is the illustration that Jesus used with the Samaritan Women he met in Sychar. You'll remember from last week, as we looked at the first part of John 4, that Jesus deliberately crossed a barrier of religious and ethnic prejudice in order to meet this woman. He sat down at the town well in the heat of mid-day and waited for her to come. John tells us that as she came to the well Jesus asked her to draw some water for him to drink. And of course, she was

taken aback. Jewish men—especially upstanding rabbis—didn't ask Samaritan women—especially sexually immoral ones—for water. She asked him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan, for water?" And that's when we saw, in verse 10, that Jesus told 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."**

Jesus is God's gift—the source of new life for dead men and women. But Jesus, sitting there at the well, draws on some Old Testament language and describes God's gift as living water. Through Jeremiah God described himself as "the fountain of living waters." Psalm 36:9 says, "For with you is the fountain of life." Isaiah 44:3 foretells the day when God would send his salvation: "For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring." If we jump ahead to the end of the story we see John's vision in Revelation a "river of the water of life" that flows from the throne of God and of his Son, the Lamb.

As he talks to this Samaritan Woman Jesus summarises the whole Gospel in these two points: First, he said, "if you knew the gift of God..." As we share the Gospel we need to tell people that God has a *gift* for them. It's not something we can earn, it's simply something that he wants to give us because he loves us and wants us to have life. Isaiah wrote, "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters" (Isaiah 55:1). But secondly Jesus identifies the gift: He says to the woman, "If you knew...*who* it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink'..." People need to know that Jesus himself is the gift. This is the Gospel: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." God offers us living water in the person of Jesus.

Now, when the woman heard Jesus say this she didn't understand. Remember Nicodemus? Jesus told him that he had

to be born again. Nicodemus didn't understand and said, "You're crazy Jesus. Are you saying that I've somehow got to go back into my mother's womb and be born a second time?" This woman doesn't understand either. Look at verse 11:

**The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"**

Both this woman and Nicodemus remind us that sinful and unredeemed men and women are dead to spiritual things. St. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 2:14 that, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." Before we can begin to understand the Gospel, the Holy Spirit has to be working in our hearts. This woman wasn't there yet. Just like Nicodemus, she was only thinking in physical terms. He thought being born again meant returning to the womb; she could only conceive of living water as coming from the well where she was standing. She looked at Jesus; he had no bucket to draw water out of the well. "Sir, did you forget that you just asked *me* for water because you don't have a bucket to get it for yourself? How can you now offer me water?" That well is still there and today it's more than a hundred feet deep. Two thousand years ago it was probably deeper. And then she goes on in verse 12:

**"Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock."**

Jesus was talking about *living* water. In that day and age living water usually referred to water that was actually running as opposed to stagnant water or water from a well. "Maybe," she thinks, "this man is offering me better water than the well has." And so she asks, "What makes you think you've got better water than the water in this well that Jacob dug for us." The people there obviously revered the well because it was dug by the great patriarch, Jacob, whom they revered. In contrast here

was Jesus, a tired, dusty, poor traveller who couldn't even draw water for himself. What could he offer that the great Jacob, the father of Israel, hadn't already given?

She wasn't ready to take Jesus seriously because as far as she could tell he was a nobody—at least nobody important—and as far as she could tell he had nothing to offer her that was better than what she already had. And we face the same problem today as we take the Gospel to the world. The world wants solutions from “great” men—from the wealthy or the powerful. Or the world wants worldly solutions. Jesus was just some dusty stranger. He wasn't much in comparison to Jacob, to the father of her people. And when Jesus talked about water, she couldn't think any further than physical water. I like the way Richard Philips puts it, “She was interested in plumbing, not salvation; she wanted an easier way to get better water from the well. Likewise, people today want advice on relationships, work, play, not theological ‘jargon’ about Jesus.”

Brothers and sisters, we have to be careful as we take the Gospel to the world. The world's priorities are wrong and too often the Church tries to cater to those wrong desires instead of offering God's gift of living water. We forget that the things of the Spirit are foolishness to those in whom the Spirit isn't working. This is why the modern preaching books tell me that I shouldn't talk about sin. Talk about sin is offensive to those in whom the Spirit isn't working to soften the heart. I used to live in Vancouver, Washington. It's a big suburban bedroom community across the river from Portland and it's been growing at 25% or more for the last twenty years. Church plants are constantly popping up all over town—almost every school has a church meeting in it on Sunday. And that's a good thing to see, but I used to get mailers from lots of those church plants and it was troubling to see that they were appealing to people with sermon series on relationships, families, “living hard and playing hard”, or having the “good things” in life. Most of it was

just pop-psychology. Those preachers recognised that we all have problems in life and that people want and need answers. The thing is that as Christians we have the *real* solution—we have living water. We have God's gift that restores men and women to right relationship with God. These folks forgot—or ignored—the need for men and women to get that vertical relationship right first—and we can't do that without talking about sin and redemption and about judgement and grace. If we leave out the Gospel all we're doing is upgrading the plumbing; we're still giving people the same water they've always had. We need to give them the Gospel's living water. Get into a right relationship with God and let the truth of the Gospel work its way through your life and those other problems will fix themselves, so to speak.

Think of this Samaritan Woman. She needed help with her relationships. She came to the well in the hottest part of the day because that's when no one else was there. She was a sinner, rejected by others. And yet even more than she needed help to heal relationships and find a better life, she needed to be reconciled to God through Jesus. Brothers and sisters, *we need to preach the Gospel*. Before he ascended Jesus didn't tell his disciples to go out and preach lifestyle tips, self-help sermons, or how to get rich. He didn't send them out—and he doesn't send us out—to upgrade the same old plumbing. He sent them and sends us out to share something completely different: living water. St. Paul says in Romans 1:16 that the Gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” It's powerful and it offers people what they can never have on their own. Jesus knew this and so he tells her in verse 13:

**“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again...”**

He says, “No, ma'am. I'm not talking about the water in this well. Even if we ran pipes directly to your house from the well, you'd still keep getting thirsty.” Jesus points to her deeper need and to a thirst that she didn't even know she had.

He points to a need that only God can meet. As St. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*: “You have made us for yourself; and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

We see this all around us. Everyone has this need and we try to meet it in all sorts of ways that will never work. People follow after false religions; people throw thousands and thousands of dollars at self-help gurus; they throw themselves into this cause or that cause and every year the causes seem to get goofier and goofier while ignoring the deepest needs of men and women. Deep down we all recognise that we are sinners; we all have a sense of guilt and in our fallen state our default setting is to seek to do good works to assuage our guilt. We live in the wealthiest, most advanced, and most comfortable civilisation in history and yet the people around us are dying of thirst. On the other hand, many people today are modern-day Augustines: trying to meet that need with “things”, throwing themselves into hedonistic philosophies and lifestyles that seek only pleasure and self-gratification. The problem is, of course, that self-gratification only creates a need for more self-gratification. It only makes the thirst more desperate. We dig cisterns for ourselves, but they're cracked and broken by sin. We need living water, but instead we're filling our lives with dust.

Malcolm Muggeridge was one of the leading journalists of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. He became a Christian and an apologist for the faith and wrote of his own experience: “I may...pass for being a relatively successful man. People occasionally stare at me in the streets—that's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for admission to the higher slopes of the Inland Revenue—that's success. Furnished with money and a little fame...[I] may partake of trendy diversions—that's pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote...represented a serious impact on our time—that's fulfilment. Yet I say to you, and I beg you to believe me, multiply these tiny triumphs by a million, add them

together, and they are nothing—less than nothing, a positive impediment—measured against one draught of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty.”

This was Jesus’ message to the woman at the well. He told her what she already knew deep-down: as long as you keep drinking the world’s water your soul will always be thirsty. And so in verse 14 he goes on and says:

**“...but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”**

Notice the condition: “whoever drinks”. Jesus doesn’t set up any hoops to jump through. This isn’t something we can earn. Remember, Jesus said at the outset that this is God’s *gift*. You don’t earn gifts. If you’ve got to earn it, it’s not a gift anymore. This is a gift given to people who can’t earn and don’t deserve it, but whom God loves anyway. For our part all we have to do is accept his offer in faith. He offers living water. We simply have to trust that it is in fact living water and drink it.

Think back again to all the boundaries Jesus was crossing to reach this woman. Jesus is ready to offer living water to anyone, no matter who they are. This woman was a notorious sinner, but notice that Jesus doesn’t bring up her sins. He’ll get into that later, but first he made the offer. Sin is no obstacle to the Cross. Sin is the *reason* for the Cross. Jesus said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17).

The consequence of taking Jesus water in faith is in those words: “whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.” Jesus’ living water will satisfy the soul. That doesn’t mean all of our problem instantly vanish. Jesus tells us that if we follow him we will face the opposition of the world, and yet he also promises to take care of us through all of it. He offers us eternal life and promises to be

with us every step of the way as we live that new life, helping us to battle sin and giving us comfort and peace in the face of hardship and opposition.

And we find that peace because, as he says, “The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” If we drink from the living water, Jesus promises to fill us with his Holy Spirit, giving us new life as God himself takes up residence in us and transforms our lives. The Spirit turns our hearts towards God and away from the things of the world. Think about that. If you’ve suddenly got living water, why would you still be obsessed with water that will never satisfy?

This is the message we need to share with the world. But in conclusion, let me ask everyone here: Has this been your experience? Presumably we’ve all had a drink from the living water, *but* how often are we still focused on the earthly well, on our cracked cisterns, on the world’s water? Jesus has given us new life. Most Christians are enthusiastic about that new life, at least for a time, as they experience the satisfaction of the joy and peace and love that Jesus has given them. But gradually we somehow become less and less content with that and we start to turn back more and more to the world. We stop living in the peace of Christ and live in the trouble and anxiety and angst of the world. We only let the love of Christ go so far in our lives. Jesus says that the greatest evidence of our love for him is that we love each other, but we don’t always let his love radically change us that much—we still love the people we want to love.

There are a lot of reasons why we begin to turn back to the world. I think the greatest reason is that we live so close to the world and we let the world fill our hearts and souls with worldly things. We can’t escape being close to the world, but brothers and sisters, instead of letting the world entice us, let it be a warning to us that it cannot fulfil. Let it drive us back to the living water where we drink daily. Let it remind us of the need to be daily living in Scripture, to

be daily letting the grace, the peace, and the love of God in Christ permeate our lives and be shown to others, and let it be a reminder each week as we come to his Table that he has given his own self that we might drink his living water and be washed clean of sin by his own blood.

As the woman began to understand what Jesus was offering her she said to him:

**“Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.”**

Let us live in such a way that we are eager each day to ask Jesus for his living water. And let us too live in a such way that we give the people around us reason to tell them about the living water and about the gift God offers them in his Son.

In our collect this morning we prayed: “Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing that you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: make in us new and contrite hearts so that, lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, we may receive from you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Father, thank you for that living water you offer us in your Son—for your mercy, your perfect forgiveness, and your new life. Let us be eager to drink from it each day that we might be just as eager to share it with the people around us. Amen.