

“Soul Thirst”

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
for Lent 3, Sunday March 19, 2017

Scripture Readings: John 4:5-19, 23-30,39-42
(by Rev. Catherine Somerville)

A monologue has been floating around, sometimes credited to George Carlin, sometimes to a Columbine High School student, sometimes to the Dalai Lama and sometimes to a pastor from Seattle.

Whoever it was that first said it, you can't deny that it contains some ideas that make a lot of sense.

The monologue goes like this:

We have taller buildings but shorter tempers; wider freeways but narrower viewpoints. We spend more time but have less; we buy more but enjoy it less. We have bigger houses and smaller families, more conveniences yet less time.

We have more degrees but less sense; more knowledge but less judgement; more experts, yet more problems. We have more gadgets but less satisfaction; more medicine yet less wellness. We take more vitamins but see fewer results. We drink too much, smoke too much, spend too recklessly, laugh too little, drive too fast, get angry too quickly, stay up too late, get up too tired, read too seldom, watch TV too much, and there is never enough time to pray.

We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values; we fly in faster planes to arrive there quicker, in order to do less and return sooner; we sign more contracts only to realize fewer profits. We talk too much, love too seldom, and lie too often. We've learned how to make a living, but not a life; we've added years to life, not life to years.

If that sentiment rings true, then it is no wonder people are feeling pretty thirsty these days. I'm convinced that human beings instinctively seek two things. We long for meaning, a sense that our lives somehow matters to the world around us. And we long for connection, a sense of being loved.

That day at the well, an outsider received just what she yearned for. This piece of John's gospel is one of the most elaborate stories of discipleship that we have been given. Jesus initiates the conversation with a request. He needs a drink of water. The Samaritan has a bucket, but she responds with shock to his request. After all, you don't talk to people like me, she tells him. But Jesus keeps going. He moves the conversation to a higher level. Turns out, he is not just any ordinary thirsty person. He has a gift to offer. He gives this woman living water and understanding. She, in turn, is so excited that she shares her deepest longing, her need for meaning and connection. He talks with her about the

wideness of God's embrace. Then, she goes off and tells others. And they, in turn, tell others, who tell others, who tell others, and here we are today.

Who is this living water for?

It's for the teenager sitting alone in his room, wondering if anyone cares. It's for the woman addicted to pain medication filling her Styrofoam cup at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting, trying to get up the nerve to tell a room full of strangers that she is not in control of her life. It's a long-married couple staring out the restaurant window on their anniversary, awkwardly silent because they have nothing more to say. A therapist in Vancouver lists the complaints he hears from clients every day—emptiness, vague depression, a hunger, a yearning to fill a void that modern life fails to satisfy with its lure of entertainment and material goods. He has called this phenomenon "soul thirst".

The Samaritan is an anomaly. She is curious, and she readily admits to being thirsty. Not everyone chooses to sample the living water. Most of us are not that brave.

Thomas Merton wrote these words in a journal: "Spiritual dryness is one of the most acute experiences of longing we can have. I look inward at my own life, and think of the people I know. What are their symptoms? A restless search for pleasure, a fear of death, boredom, addiction. Any of these can betray a longing that is at root spiritual. They are the cries and whispers of someone who has lost their way."

What is living water?

Preacher Frederick Buechner puts it like this: "To turn around and believe that the good news that we are loved is **gooder** than we ever dared hope, and that to believe in the good news, to live out of it and toward it, to be in love with that good news, is of all glad things in the world the **gladdest** thing of all."

Our faith tells us that God does some of God's best work with people who are truly, seriously lost, those who are truly, seriously thirsting for more. We are connected to a God who wants us to thrive, and that nothing, not even death can separate us from God's love. That Vancouver therapist also says that there are three things people suffering from soul thirst need to hear more of in this world: "I love you", "I forgive you" and "Supper's ready". And isn't that just what church is all about? Coming together and hearing a story about how much we are loved by God. Saying a prayer that offers up all the ways we were less than we might have been, and then, being reminded that we are forgiven, knowing that the slate is wiped clean. And the supper is communion—visible reminders of the grace that welcomes us to the banquet table. In the midst of a world marked by brokenness and ruptured relationships, this really is good news.

We accept the offer. We drink the living water, and then, we can go on living. That's how God is. Who knows where it comes from, but it sustains us enough to keep us on our way. The last lines in this story are the best ones of all: "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did, and loved me anyway". That is grace. That is faith. That is love. It saved a Samaritan's life, and it is offered to all of us. At that moment, she no longer saw a

stranger. She was able to see God. And when she receives what he offers her, when she drinks deeply of the living water, she leaps up, and goes to tell the rest of the world.

That is the treasure-grace and love. Meaning and connection. Each week, we are adding a pearl to our treasure chest. The symbol I offer today is an invitation to a party, something you might receive in the mail. The pearl of this story is the reminder that God has invited us, just as God has reminds us every day, how much we are loved, how important we are, how much we matter. For God so loved the world, that he gave his Son, for us, for a bunch of people whose throats are parched and hearts are dry. It's an invitation for all the folks who are feeling worn out and tired, the ones whose calendars are too full. This is an invitation for everyone who has no time to catch their breath, for all the people whose doing and being have become mixed up and muddled. Come and see. Come and see.

“An invitation so unexpected,
A messenger so insistent,
We accept, in spite of ourselves.
We arrive and delight answers.
We are anointed with laughter and clothed with wonder.
Voices share glad tidings, good news, and we learn to love this life again.”
Come and see. Come and see. (Keri Wehlander)

Sources Used:

Joy is our Banquet, Resources for Everyday Worship, Keri Wehlander, The United Church Publishing House, 1996. Page 79.

The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible: John, Dennis E. Smith and Michael E. Williams, The United Church Publishing House, 1996.

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