

John 4:1-26

¹⁻³ Jesus realized that the Pharisees were keeping count of the baptisms that he and John performed (although his disciples, not Jesus, did the actual baptizing). They had posted the score that Jesus was ahead, turning him and John into rivals in the eyes of the people. So Jesus left the Judean countryside and went back to Galilee.

⁴⁻⁶ To get there, he had to pass through Samaria. He came into Sychar, a Samaritan village that bordered the field Jacob had given his son Joseph. Jacob's well was still there. Jesus, worn out by the trip, sat down at the well. It was noon.

⁷⁻⁸ A woman, a Samaritan, came to draw water. Jesus said, "Would you give me a drink of water?" (His disciples had gone to the village to buy food for lunch.)

⁹ The Samaritan woman, taken aback, asked, "How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" (Jews in those days wouldn't be caught dead talking to Samaritans.)

¹⁰ Jesus answered, "If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking *me* for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water."

¹¹⁻¹² The woman said, "Sir, you don't even have a bucket to draw with, and this well is deep. So how are you going to get this 'living water'? Are you a better man than our ancestor Jacob, who dug this well and drank from it, he and his sons and livestock, and passed it down to us?"

¹³⁻¹⁴ Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life."

¹⁵ The woman said, "Sir, give me this water so I won't ever get thirsty, won't ever have to come back to this well again!"

¹⁶ He said, "Go call your husband and then come back."

¹⁷⁻¹⁸ "I have no husband," she said.

"That's nicely put: 'I have no husband.' You've had five husbands, and the man you're living with now isn't even your husband. You spoke the truth there, sure enough."

¹⁹⁻²⁰ "Oh, so you're a prophet! Well, tell me this: Our ancestors worshiped God at this mountain, but you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place for worship, right?"

²¹⁻²³ "Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you Samaritans will worship the Father neither here at this mountain nor there in Jerusalem. You worship guessing in the dark; we Jews worship in the clear light of day. God's way of salvation is made available through the Jews. But the time is coming—it has, in fact, come—when what you're called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter.

²³⁻²⁴ "It's who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That's the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly *themselves* before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration."

²⁵ The woman said, "I don't know about that. I do know that the Messiah is coming. When he arrives, we'll get the whole story."

²⁶ “I am he,” said Jesus. “You don’t have to wait any longer or look any further.”

Water

We’re in week 4 of our series on Season of Creation. Having discussed, earth, wind, and fire, we move on to WATER. Today we explore this water imagery that Jesus uses in John’s gospel, to once again describe the Holy Spirit. How many of you remember the days before bottled water, before you had to buy it? Of course, and thank God, we still have drinkable water flowing from our faucets, and we can still find public drinking fountains where you can get as much as you need to survive. But I am fearful of the day when all drinking water will have to be purchased, and our very survival will depend upon our ability to pay a price for this very basic necessity. Water, like salvation, like God’s spirit, should always be free for any who need, and all people need it.

In today’s reading, there’s a lot going on, and you should probably have some handle on the issues that are at play here. You have the Pharisees who are a religious sect within Judaism and are competing with the theologies of John and Jesus, and so they’re trying to pit them against one another by counting the number of baptisms performed by John and the disciples of Jesus, and trying to create competition between the two groups. You know I first heard about the Pharisees when I was in Sunday School, and I didn’t know anything about them except that they were BAD; I had no idea what they believed or what they taught; I just knew they were bad. Here they are trying to create a fight between Jesus and John – “Hey, I heard Jesus had sixteen more baptisms than you did today, John. Seems like he’s kind of taking charge of this ministry, doesn’t he? What are you gonna do about it, John?” The same thing happens today, right? “Hey, I heard the new pastor in Brighton Heights is quite charismatic. I heard they took in sixteen new members last week. How many did you take in, hmm?” The Pharisees aren’t the only ones who play this game; there are those folks in all places in all religions, people who think that the only way for them to gain power or keep power is by putting down anyone who seems to be gaining power.

And you see how Jesus handles this silliness? He stops what he’s doing. He stops giving the Pharisees any ammunition for their little war. His ministry is not competing with John’s; it’s *complementing* John’s. I’m glad to say that one of the results of the shrinking of the mainline churches in America is NOT an intensification of competition but a proliferation of cooperation. Rather than churches competing over prospective members they are talking to one another about how they can help one another. If two churches have programs for youth they plan things together, and churches without youth programs, rather than competing with churches that do, should work *with* those churches that are

doing a good job to make them even better! All churches, regardless of denomination, should be in the business of saving lives, of making disciples for Jesus Christ, so we don't need to haggle about *where* those lives are being transformed or where those disciples are being made. So John the Baptist is doing a great job of baptizing people; Jesus doesn't need to compete but instead can move into another ministry.

And that's what he does. He loaded-up-the-truck-and-he-moved-to-Galilee. Hills that is. And to get there, he needed to pass through Samaria, another place where he was sure to run into problems. I just need to stop here and reflect on what a difficult time Jesus has dealing with humanity. The Pharisees are trying to sabotage his ministry, and now he's going through a land where people will hate him for simply being a Jew. Jesus runs into conflict wherever he goes, which makes him quite qualified for helping us when we deal with conflict. Whatever struggles we may face, we can look to Jesus because he's probably been there and done that. If you read the Gospels you realize just how much adversity he had to deal with, and he offers us great wisdom on how to deal with it. Today's reading is a case in point; how does he deal with these Samaritans who have this long-running feud with the Jews? He sits down and talks to them.

"Excuse me, miss. Can I get a drink of water?" Now keep in mind that any self-respecting Jew would not even drink from the same jar as a Samaritan. Any self-respecting Jew would not even speak to a Samaritan, let alone a Samaritan *woman*.

And this is where the Jews had truly missed the point of what it meant to be God's chosen people; they made it a point of pride. They considered it a gift to be preserved rather than shared. They understood salvation as something reserved for them rather than seeing themselves as a means for God to save the entire human races. And so they dwelled on the differences between themselves and people like Samaritans while they squabbled among themselves about who had the right interpretation of the law and of Jewish history. They were divided from people outside of their own religion, and they were divided among themselves. Sound familiar? How many Christians feel that they have some exclusive right to salvation and shun anyone who doesn't see things the way they do? And at the same time Christians squabble among themselves about how has the right theology.

If anyone has a clear understand of salvation I would say it's Jesus, and look what he does; he starts a conversation with this Samaritan woman, telling her what salvation is all about. It's about living water, about this Holy Spirit springing up like an artesian well gushing fountains of endless life. Jesus is describing *life in the Spirit*. I've shared with you throughout this series what life in the Spirit is all about, and today I'll do so in the context of today's story.

Religion is so often perverted into a competition over who stands in God's favor, Jews fighting with Samaritans and other Jews over who got it right. I compare it to two

siblings competing with each other over who Mom and Dad love the most. Let me ask you something; who is a child of God? Is anyone *not* a child of God? God created us all, and loves us all, regardless of our race or color or gender or ability level or socioeconomic status or sexual orientation. This Samaritan woman asks Jesus about who has it right when it comes to where we worship; the Jews who insist that worship happen in Jerusalem, or the Samaritans who insist that their temples are just as valid a place to worship as the temple in Jerusalem. And Jesus says, “The day is coming – no, wait a minute; it’s already here – when it won’t matter *where* you worship but what will matter is *how* you worship. The right way to worship is not competing with one another to convince yourself that you stand more in God’s favor than someone else. The right way to worship is by loving God wholeheartedly because he holds us all in his favor. The Jew, rather than trying to preserve some privileged position with God, needs to recognize that he/she is special only in the sense that he/she is a vehicle for God to communicate his love to all of humanity. And the Samaritan need not feel at a disadvantage; he/she should appreciate the Jew for teaching him/her of God’s saving love. We humans have a bad habit of taking what God gives freely and abundantly and trying to monopolize it and sell it for our own profit. That’s not the way of God. Living water gushes in abundance and eternally. So it is with those who live by the Spirit. God’s love flows into us freely, and flows out of us freely. We have no need to compete for God’s love because God’s love is available in abundance for all who desire it. Love is one of those things where the more of it you give the more of it you *have*. It IS that endless stream of living water gushing fountains of endless life. And church is the place where we celebrate what God has provided us in such abundance.

Today we baptize Jack Lee, and as we sprinkle his head with holy water, with *God’s* water, we recognize that spring of living water gushing fountains of eternal life. May that fountain flow from us that Jack, and the entire Lee family, will know the true nature of God.