

Reflection on “The Gift of Water”

John 4: 7-15

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered 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.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

“If you only knew the gift of God in front of you...” Jesus says.

From one parched soul to another.

And I think we all know what Jesus was really thirsty for
when he asked the woman for a drink.

At first, I was just going to tell you about my water memory. About the place I grew up called Crystal Lake, IL. Its claim to fame was that it had the fourth cleanest lake in the state. It’s where I took swimming lessons over the summer, where my father and I would bundle up and go ice fishing in the winter. My father and I would catch Bluegill and Small-mouths that we would fry up for dinner when we got home after dark. Good memories. However, these days there aren’t many fish in the lake and the ones that are caught aren’t edible. A necklace of beer cans accessorizes the shorelines. And signs are posted on the beach warning: “Swim at your own risk!” I was going to talk about how the gift of water loses its giftedness when it becomes neglected and abused. I thought we could look at ways that we might cherish water as a response of our gratitude to God. But as true as that is, the well is not quite deep enough.

Especially after Hurricane Florence smashed into the coast. The idea of water being a gift from God suddenly becomes a lot more complicated after a hurricane. Pictures of trees floating down roads like canoes, rescue teams peeking in car windows making sure no one is trapped inside. Live footage of animals caged in kennels, up to their furry necks in brown flood waters. All the damaged homes, the death tolls rising. It’s hard to celebrate the gift of water after we have just experienced what kind of damage water can do to people’s lives and the thirst it can create.

So I thought maybe we could reflect on us all being inside the well itself. After all, we live in a watershed, which means we live on a body of land whose rain runoff connects into a larger reservoirs of water. This land's water runs into Silas Creek, which eventually flows into the Yadkin River, which makes its way into the Pee Dee River Basin, through South Carolina and dumps into the Atlantic Ocean. So it made me think about how watersheds permeate our human made borders as well as the systemic divides in our cities, stateliness and even nations. The watershed of Princeville is connected to Lewisville, and Wilmington to Winston Salem. The water source on the east side is connected to west side, just as Jew's water source is connected to the Samaritan's. I wondered, "What if the good news was that we are in an interconnected well, brought together by our common thirst?"

And as wonderful and as true as that is, still the well is not quite deep enough.

Then I read a story about Alyeesha. Alyeesha is a poor African American woman who decided to ride out Hurricane Florence. She lives in Carteret County, NC where she rents a one-bedroom house that happens to be her grandmother's old sharecropping cabin. Think about that: *She lives in her grandmother's sharecropping cabin and rents it from somebody else.* Alyeesha and her neighbors decided to ride out the hurricane. Not because they wanted to, but because most of them either didn't have a car, or enough money for gas. For some there are too many babies, or too many old folks. For others, there are jobs that won't be there for them if they missed a few days of work, and paychecks that haven't been cleared yet. The point of Alyeesha's story is that the hurricane, as bad as it was, isn't the deeper problem. The deeper problem is the consistent flood of poverty which parches her body and soul before the storm comes and heightens her thirst afterwards when her vulnerability is exposed.

But this also makes me wonder about the invisible people in our world who have to go to the well at noontime, because that is how they have learned to survive. I mean, who notices the shade tree mechanic whose treasured toolbox now rests at the bottom of the river? Who notices the woman who denies being pregnant because she can't afford a doctor's visit, fighting off the contractions until the water in her womb's well springs forth? Who sees the children whose dreams are washed away by the slow drip of poverty which asks them to sit patiently in their title one schools and stand obediently while pledging allegiance to the flag, when their future will look a lot like Alyeesha's: living inside that same caste system as her grandmother did, and somehow calling it home.

The Samaritan woman, Alyeesha, and too many like her aren't fictional characters. They are thirsty and stuck in the lowest places where nobody cares to or remembers to look. Not the rescuers, definitely not our legislators, maybe not even our churches.

But at noontime, at the well, Jesus looks and says, "If you only knew the gift that was in front of you." And I imagine Jesus says this to her because he also sees the gift of the woman who is in front of him. He not only sees her, but he allows her to see him. For it is to this woman—this

Samaritan woman!—who is the first one in the gospel who Jesus comes out to as the Messiah. And after their encounter, the woman is no longer invisible, for *she* becomes the one who preaches and proclaims the good news to others. She becomes the container for the Living Water to offer to a thirsty world. “If you only knew the gift that was in front of you.”

Perhaps there is room inside of the deep well for all of it: water *is* a gift to be cherished and cared for. We *are* living in a watershed where we *are* all connected by the water we share. And we *do become* the containers of the Living Water who offer gospel news a thirsty world. Because, God’s grace is like water: it flows downhill and pools up in the lowest places, it gets into the cracks of the forgotten places, and it promises Living Water in the deepest wells of our world and our lives.

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