



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – October 14, 2007

Accepted

The Reverend Harold E. Masback, III

## John 4:1-30

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John”<sup>2</sup>—although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—<sup>3</sup>he left Judea and started back to Galilee. <sup>4</sup>But he had to go through Samaria. <sup>5</sup>So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup>Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. <sup>7</sup>A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”<sup>8</sup> (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) <sup>9</sup>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.) <sup>10</sup>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.” <sup>11</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? <sup>12</sup>Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” <sup>13</sup>Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup>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.” <sup>15</sup>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.” <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” <sup>17</sup>The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; <sup>18</sup>for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” <sup>19</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup>Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup>You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup>But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. <sup>24</sup>God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” <sup>25</sup>The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ).

*“When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.”<sup>26</sup> Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”*

*<sup>27</sup>Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?”<sup>28</sup> Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, <sup>29</sup>“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”<sup>30</sup> They left the city and were on their way to him.*

A solitary figure trudges along in the noon day sun. One weathered hand balances her earthen jug, while the other clutches her shabby robe to her face. Her journey to the well is a familiar one - the one unavoidable chore of her daily round. She used to vary her route or count her steps to enliven her routine, but that was thousands of dusty trips ago. Now, there is only resignation.

The lonely monotony weighs on her like a dull ache, but a dull ache of mindless repetition is still better than a sharp stab of conscious remembrance. Far better to shuffle along mechanically than to let her mind skip back to the daily outings with her mother. Back then the trip to the well had been a high point of the day: hearing her aunts’ laughter in the lane, racing her sisters to the gate for their morning hugs, listening wide-eyed as the older women held court by the well. Now, she was alone, utterly alone.

At first, the problem wasn’t so much her three divorces as the consequent descent into poverty - the other women knew the broken relationships hadn’t necessarily been her fault. The patriarchal laws on divorce were severe; a husband could put his wife out for any reason or no reason. She knew that, and they knew that, but broken relationships meant more than rejection for a Samaritan woman, they meant a desiccating life of poverty. There were few if any means of support for a single woman; and each divorce had pushed her further away from her family’s charity.

Indeed, something had simply snapped after the fourth and fifth relationships ended, for religious law barred a

woman from marrying more than three times. Finally, marginalized and desperate, she had simply given up, accepting a man's bed without marriage. For the moment at least, she had shelter, but the cost was a form of social drought. Going to the well with the other women was now out of the question, and so she waited for the searing heat of noon, when the other woman would be gathered in the cool of their homes.

It wasn't until she had put down her heavy jug that she noticed the figure sitting on the other side of the well. It would have been bad enough had it been another woman – the sneer of recognition, the stony silence, the hustling away with a bit of gossip about her broken sandals – but it wasn't a woman, it was a man. And this was, if anything, even worse.

Every man in the village knew who she was and what she was. Even men passing through seemed to have sharp eyes for the signs. Since religious law prohibited a man from being alone with a woman in public, the encounter could only take one of two courses. The man thinking of his reputation would quickly gather his things, cursing the inconvenience of her arrival; the man thinking baser thoughts would quickly size up her vulnerability, whispering a hurried invitation she could only experience as disrespect.

As she was lowering her gaze and bracing for today's variety of indignity, she glimpsed the man's Jewish features and cringed at her misfortune. The Jews and the Samaritans were blood enemies, nurturing ancient hatreds at close quarters. Jews considered all Samaritans ritually impure, and Jewish holy men were notoriously circumspect about the company of women. A rabbi wouldn't even appear with his wife in public. One pious sect had even earned the nickname "the bruised and bleeding Pharisees," because they ritualistically closed their eyes whenever they encountered women, piously crashing into gateposts and breaking their noses.

"Give me a drink." At first she wasn't sure she had heard him correctly. If he was really asking her for water, it was an unseemly act of physical and moral weakness. If he was soliciting something else . . . well, it was simply clumsy. Confused, she looked up and challenged him sullenly, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria."

"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."

Now, as readers, you and I have been down this road in John's Gospel before, so we think we know where the author is leading us. In Chapter 3, Jesus had encountered Nicodemus, a religious leader and ruler of the Jews. Nicodemus may have been the most connected, respected, empowered and pious of all the Jews, but his concrete, materialist mind still couldn't make heads or tails out of Jesus' spiritual metaphors, and he slipped back into the night muttering in frustration.

Here in Chapter 4, Jesus is encountering a Samaritan woman at a well, a veritable walking thesaurus of alienation. She may have been the most estranged, rejected, powerless and tainted of all the despised Samaritans, so surely we are about to watch round two of how the world did not understand Jesus, how, in the words of the Prologue, "the world did not know him."

At first, her reply does seem to follow the Nicodemus pattern: "Sir you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" Uh oh, here we go again, another Burns and Allen routine. Where Jesus had spoken to Nicodemus about being spiritually born from above; Nicodemus had understood only being materially born again from a womb. Where Jesus had spoken to the woman about the spiritual gift of living water, the woman understood only a material gift of water from a flowing stream.

But before you settle on the easy similarities in the stories, keep your eyes peeled for the emerging differences, for it is in these differences that Jesus is about to turn humanity's understanding of God, religion and spirituality upside down. Keep your eye on the minuet slowly evolving between Jesus and the woman, for it is here, in this relationship, that the relationship between God and human is taking its most radical turn.

First, note that Jesus initiates and leads the minuet forward. He had every reason to flee: the enmity of the Samaritans, the scandal of encountering a woman alone, the taint of the woman's past, and the futility of revealing spiritual truths to an impoverished, uneducated, female pagan. But that seems to be just the

point of the story: in Jesus, God is shredding the human categories we use to judge and divide and reject. God's long arms of love are reaching out to gather all humanity – all humanity - into God's dance of unconditional acceptance.

Second, note that the woman begins to follow his lead. She too had every reason to flee. Life certainly hadn't given her any cause to trust in male acceptance, holy or otherwise. But that, too, seems to be just the point of the story. She senses his acceptance, even after he waves off her little misdirection about having no husband. It's quite clear that he has known everything about her all along; yep, even that painful domestic resume. Nevertheless, she feels accepted, utterly accepted.

Can it possibly be that a God who really knows our deepest foibles, our deepest secrets, our deepest addictions, our deepest doubts about God, could possibly love us anyway? Can it possibly be that the God of all creation accepts us even when we can't accept ourselves?

Finally, note the time/stamp date on the gift Jesus offers the woman, "Those who drink of the water that I give will never be thirsty. The water I will give them will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Jewish and Samaritan traditions both looked forward to messianic salvation at the end of the age, and there is something in Jesus' teaching that anticipates an eternal life beyond the veil, but the tense in this story, the promise in this encounter, the living water Jesus offers the woman at the well and every one of us this morning is eternal life now.

Living water poured out now. Our thirst for acceptance slaked now. Eternal life blessed to us now. Does that seem too good to be true? Do our concrete, materialist minds balk at this spiritual truth? Do we want to rub our eyes like Nicodemus and ask, "how can these things be?"

The key to understanding Jesus' promise of eternal life lies in the Greek words behind our English translation. When the author of John's Gospel recorded Jesus' sayings, he had three different Greek words to choose from for "life." If Jesus had been

offering only biological life, mere biological existence, the author might have used the Greek word, "bios," the root of our English word, "biology." And if Jesus had been offering only mental consciousness, mere brain function, the author might have used the Greek word, "psyche," the root of our English word, "psychology." But Jesus was not offering only biological existence or mere mental consciousness. Jesus was offering a life of joy, love, faith and hope, a divinely blessed life captured by the Greek word "zoe," and that's the word found in John's Gospel.

Zoe means not just being alive, it means being fully alive. It means not just a parched, arid, thirsty existence, but a flourishing, exuberant, fulfilled existence. Your dry, browned out lawn at the end of August has bios - it is technically alive. But your lush, green lawn in April has zoe - it is flourishingly alive. And just because the blessings of joy and love and faith and hope are gifts of the eternal God, so Jesus called his gift, zoe aeonian: eternal life, God's eternal gifts, God's living water penetrating and enlivening our existence now, on earth, today.

Now, I know spiritual reality is elusive, and understanding Jesus is no easier for us today than it was for Nicodemus and the woman at the well. But I also believe that God's Holy Spirit has been working in our lives since before we were born, and so if we examine our own lives carefully we'll find we know more about God's gifts than we realize. For instance, let me ask you to think back on your own life and summon up the moments when you felt most fully alive. When everything felt just right, beautiful, complete. Think back to the moments when it just felt like God was in God's heaven and all was right with the world.

You know, I've asked that question at over a dozen retreats to all kinds of gatherings, and there's a pattern that always runs through the answers. Folks say things like, I felt fully alive: when I first said "I love you" and she said, "I love you" back; when I blurted out my tearful confession and she said that she forgave me; when I looked into the eyes of my newborn child; when we passed the candle at our final worship on the O.G. mission trip; when we scored at the buzzer and won the championship in double overtime; when I just lingered on the summit and watched the sun sink behind the peaks in a gentle glow of pinks and purples. Do you see the pattern?

Now let me ask you to think back on your life and summon up the moments when you felt most beaten down, most diminished, most lifeless. Again, the answers over the years have run to a pattern. Folks say things like, I felt most lifeless when my best friend moved away at end of seventh grade; when the board asked for my resignation; when my wife died; when the biopsy came back positive. Again, do you see the pattern?

After years of asking the questions, it sure seems to me that we most fully experience flourishing life, zoe, when we feel connected, accepted, in relationship, drawn out of ourselves, part of something larger than ourselves,<sup>1</sup> even if it is a baseball team, even if it is the majesty of God's creation. And it sure seems to me that we experience diminution, desiccation, lifelessness when we feel cut off, rejected, isolated, turned in upon ourselves.

Now my point isn't just that we flourish better when we're forgiven than when we're condemned; better when we're accepted than when we're rejected; better when we're in relationship than when we're alone. That's probably all true, but if that were my point than our flourish would be at the mercy of the external circumstances of our lives. There would be flourish and growth in the happy, well watered Spring times of our lives, but there would be decline and diminution in the hot, dry, dog days of our lives.

No, my point is that Jesus' offer of eternal life is an unconditional offer of divine forgiveness, an unconditional offer of divine acceptance, an unconditional offer of divine relationship for all the seasons of our lives. No matter how dry the drought may be on the outside of our lives, Jesus' offer is the living water that becomes in us – inside us – a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

Few of us are ever likely to face worse external circumstances than those faced by the Samaritan woman at the well, but Jesus accepted her anyway. And just because she experienced his forgiveness, just because she experienced his acceptance, just because she experienced his offer of relationship, so she could step into the light, where Nicodemus had fled back into the dark. So she could ask, "Sir, give me this water." So the whole world honors to this day as the

one who accepted the gift Nicodemus missed. The gift of eternal life. **Amen.**

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1 From E. St1 From E. Stanley Jones,  
<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/e/estanleyj270471.html>

To pass from estrangement from God to be a son of God is the basic fact of conversion. That altered relationship with God gives you an altered relationship with yourself, with your brother man, with nature, with the universe.