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EVEN BETTER THAN RUNNING WATER

John 4:1-30

Every now and then lines from old movies pop into my head. Like “you can’t handle the truth,” or “you messed with the wrong marine” from *A Few Good Men,* or even, “so you’re saying there’s a chance,” from *Dumb And Dumber.* One scene that rattled around in my head last week was from one of my old favorites, *Field Of Dreams*. There is a scene in which the central character, Ray, has taken famous writer Terrence Mann to a baseball game at Fenway Park in Boston. As they are in line at a concession stand they are talking about Terry’s past and about how he is very different today. Ray asks Terry, “What do you want?” Terry responds a bit angrily, “I want them to stop looking to me for answers, begging me to speak again, write again, be a leader. I want them to start thinking for themselves. I want my privacy.” As he gestures at the concession stand Ray says, “Uh, no, I mean, what do you want?” Terry then says, “Oh. I’ll have a hot dog.”

What do you want? That’s a question we all need to ask ourselves. A more important question is what do you need? I learned about something I need recently. I was told that I need to be saved from a deadly appliance that is lurking in our kitchen. What a surprise to find out that all these years we have had a terrifying device poisoning us in our home. It’s amazing that we have survived with a gas stove in our house all those years. Now I know I need an electric stove. Actually, I think what I need is for the nanny state to leave me alone.

Unfortunately we humans often are not clear about what we really need. We tend to be myopic about it, get focused on the most immediate thing that is speaking the loudest to us, the thing that is staring us in the face. What we often don’t remember is that the most important things in the long run are rarely the things that shout the loudest. Today we will see Jesus confront a person about what she needs. She will find out that what she thinks she needs is not what she needs most. Jesus is going to show her that what she really needs is far more important. Let’s look at John 4:1-30.

JESUS ENCOUNTERED A THIRSTY WOMAN

Opposition to Jesus from the leadership of Israel was growing, so he decided that it would be wise to leave Jerusalem and go back to the hinterlands of Galilee in order to let the heat die down. John said in verse 4, “He had to go through Samaria.” Samaria was north of Judea. The most direct route to go from Judea to Galilee, which was even farther north, went straight through Samaria.

When our son was in college at Cal Poly SLO, if we went to visit him, we had to drive north, which meant we had to go right through LA, and that was always a nightmare. But to avoid LA you would have to drive a torturously circuitous route out through the desert, cutting through Tehachapi into the Central Valley, eventually going west over to the coast father up the valley. It would have taken many more hours than just going straight north. Even though it was trying and we hated it, we had to go through Los Angeles. By the most direct route to Galilee Jesus had to go through Samaria.

However, it was common in Jesus’ day for Jewish people to make a detour around Samaria. There was serious animosity between Jews and the Samaritans, as you will see shortly, so sometimes Jews traveling between Galilee and Judea would take a roundabout route through the Jordan River Valley to the east of Samaria, even though it added many miles to their travels.

When we see that Jesus “had to go through Samaria,” it wasn’t because he had no other alternative. He could have skirted the area like many did. He had to go through Samaria because there was something he had to do there, someone he had to talk to. We meet that person in verse 7. Jesus arrived at a town called Sychar. Jesus and his buddies got there in the middle of the day. It was hot, they had been walking for some time, and he was tired. There was a well near the village that had originally been dug by Jacob, the Jewish patriarch. Jesus’ guys went into the town to find a fast food place where they could get some food for lunch, while Jesus sat down by the well to rest. While he was there a woman showed up, coming from out of town to get water. Jesus asked the woman if she would give him some water to drink. This totally shocked the woman. She said, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?”

That seems like a strange reaction. He asked because he was thirsty and had no way to get water from the well. It seems like a fairly obvious request. So why was this woman so shocked? It was because Jesus just trampled all over some big time cultural barriers. First, there was the issue of her being a woman. It was accepted that a man, particularly a religious one, would not strike up a conversation with an unaccompanied woman that he did not know. That was just not done.

Second, not only was she a woman, but she was a Samaritan woman. As I mentioned there was great animosity between Samaritans and Jews. Samaria was part of the territory that rebelled against Judah when Solomon’s son, Rehoboam levied heavy taxes. They broke away and formed a separate nation. In order to assert their independence they set up a site in the north where they could worship without going to Jerusalem, even though that was a violation of the Law of Moses. They eventually ended up with their own heretical religion. Then they were conquered by Assyria. The Assyrians deported many of the residents and brought in people from other conquered lands to live there. These Gentile people intermarried with the remaining Jewish people in Samaria, producing a mixed race.

The Jews despised them on multiple levels. There had been a couple of episodes of outbreaks of violence between Jews and Samaritans in the years prior to Jesus’ lifetime that fanned the flames of hatred. There was political hatred because they became a rival nation, there was religious hatred because they adulterated the Jewish religion, there was cultural hatred and there was racial hatred. So this woman was astounded when this Jewish man struck up a conversation with her.

There was one other obstacle Jesus blew through when he spoke to this woman. There was a reason she was at the well in the middle of the day all by herself. Normally women would go in groups to draw water early in the morning and again at the end of the day. This woman was by herself in the middle of the day because the other women of the village would have nothing to do with her. As we will see, this woman had led a less than sterling life. Her reputation was well known in town, and the other women wanted no part of her. She was shunned and looked down upon by the villagers, especially the other women. It is stunning and bordering on scandalous that Jesus specifically chose this woman to have a conversation with and to bring good news.

Jesus often flew right by comments made by people in order to go to the heart of the matter. In response to Nicodemus’ opening pleasantries Jesus replied, “If you want to enter the kingdom of God you must be born again.” Here again, after the woman commented on how shocking it was that Jesus was talking to her, Jesus said, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” The woman was stumped by that statement, so she seized on the one part of Jesus’ statement she could understand.

She understood him to be claiming he could give her water rather than the other way around. But this well was deep, and Jesus had nothing he could use to lower down and hold water. She was thinking literally. Then Jesus really pulled out a stunner. “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Just as Nicodemus interpreted Jesus literally and said it was impossible for a person to go back and experience birth again, this woman is stuck on the literal. Never having to come out to the well and get water because you’re never thirsty again sounded wonderful to her.

How great that would have been to her is hard for us to understand. What do you do when you are thirsty? You go to the faucet and turn it on, get some water and drink it. No big deal. That woman would have thought if she had the kind of running water that we have, she wouldn’t have wanted anything else. Imagine having all the water you could want right there at your command. She did not have anything close to that. She had to walk to the well, which was a little outside of town, carrying some sort of container, fill the container with water, and lug it back to her home. She had to do that chore for every drop of water she used, whether it be for drinking, cooking, bathing or cleaning.

The average American uses 80-100 gallons of water per day. Much of that is for landscaping, flushing toilets, taking showers and washing clothes. The average person in India today uses 38 gallons per day. Let’s assume the woman would need 10 gallons per day. She was living with a man, so the 2 of them would need 20 gallons per day. Water weighs about 8.3 pounds per gallon, so that would mean the woman would have to haul 160 pounds of water to her house every day. She would make 2 trips a day to the well carrying 80 pounds on the way back. It was a tedious and difficult chore. All she was thinking when Jesus talked about never being thirsty again is seriously cutting back on that task. It was going to make life much easier, she figured. She just wanted her daily life to get easier.

JESUS IDENTIFIED THE WOMAN’S REAL NEED

This woman reminds us that most of us are pre-occupied with the demands of our lives in this world. Those demands are so immediate and feel so pressing that they tend to eclipse everything else. This woman had a difficult life. The task of getting water took time and considerable effort every single day. She never had a day off. That was just one aspect of how hard life was. Most people in that day were focused on just having enough to eat and on the task of preparing food when there were no gas or electric stoves, no refrigerators, no microwaves. Anything cooked had to be cooked over an open fire. That meant considerable effort went into gathering fuel for a fire, building a fire, creating some arrangement for cooking food for the fire, then actually gathering the food. Life was demanding, and if one didn’t do the work, one would starve.

Life was a real battle. Later we will see that when Jesus miraculously provided food for people they got excited about the idea that he could solve their ever present food problem and make life much better. This woman was thinking along those lines. Hey, miracle water sounds good. Drink it once and never be thirsty again. Sign me up!

We don’t have the same daily demands to simply survive, but we are all just as pre-occupied with what we feel we need to get through life. What are people thinking about most of the time? Having enough money, having a good job, succeeding, maybe some approval, some friends, some loved ones to help us get through life. Our focus is as much on the things of this life as was that woman’s.

Jesus was human, and he knew human beings very well. He understood how this world blanks out everything else. He knew that was happening for this woman. He was aiming at something much deeper, much more significant. He saw that he needed some way to shock this woman into thinking on that deeper level. What he came up with stunned the woman. He said in verse 16, “Go call your husband.” Uh oh. Now he’s getting personal. She said, “I have no husband.” Jesus agreed. “Isn’t that the truth? You’ve had 5 husbands and the guy you’re living with now isn’t your husband.”

There is a difference between Greek and English that gets overlooked here. In Greek there were no special words for husband and wife. The words used were simply man and woman. Seems to me that could have been a little confusing at weddings. “I now pronounce you man and woman” would cause me to wonder, “What were they before?”

That difference sheds some light on this woman’s lifestyle. I don’t think she’d been married and divorced 5 times. I think Jesus meant she’d lived with 5 different men, very possibly never marrying any of them. In saying the man she was living with at that time was not her man, I suspect Jesus meant that she was living with a guy who was actually married to someone else.

Do you begin to get a feel for why this lady wasn’t real popular with the other women in town? She was the other woman for a number of women, and for those she hadn’t victimized yet, she was a threat to do so in the future. The question is, why did Jesus bring this up? Why doesn’t he stick to religious matters? He’s kind of sticking his nose in her personal business, isn’t he? Hey, if that’s her chosen lifestyle, what gives him the right to try to shame her for it?

Jesus is not trying to shame the woman. Notice that when he brought up the matter of her husband she responded by saying, “I don’t have a man.” Well that wasn’t true. What was she doing there? She was trying to cover up the truth. She didn’t want to admit how she lived. Why not? Because she was already ashamed of it. She felt guilty and Jesus knew it.

This woman was never going to get living water if she focused only on the demands of this world and if she tried to bury the guilt she felt, covering it over the best she could. Jesus knew the only way she could ever have living water was by being free of her guilt, so he had to force her to get it out in the open where it could be dealt with. Our house is 32 years old. Houses that old have some issues. One is that they tend to settle as the years go by. That settling caused a few superficial cracks in some of our walls. My approach to that was basically a see no evil tactic. It’s no big deal. As long as it wasn’t a big deal I didn’t have to do anything about it. Then we had a crack in our living room that kept growing. It started to look like a model of the Grand Canyon. At that point I had to admit it was a problem. Once I admitted that we had to address it. This woman had an issue, and Jesus knew it had to be addressed for her to experience real life. So he brought it into the open so it could be addressed.

This woman deserves sympathy. In her society women were pretty much powerless. They had no way to support themselves. They were totally dependent on men to support them, and that made them vulnerable to being taken advantage of by men. This woman was not some shameless libertine woman who scoffed at any morals. She was just trying to survive. I suspect she had suffered considerably from men and had experienced a lot of rejection. She had been used repeatedly, and she was just trying to get through life. She felt the guilt of the things she had done, but she couldn’t see any other way to survive.

With the revelation that Jesus knew all about her past even though he had never met her, this woman realizes that this is no ordinary man. The only thing she can come up with is that he is a prophet who knows things that God has revealed to him. That reality moved the conversation onto an entirely different plane. She knows now that they’re not talking about some physical magic water. Jesus is talking about eternal life, about a life of fullness right now, a life that gushes from inside a person like a roaring river. And she knows this has to do with spiritual things. The woman gets something many people fail to grasp, to their own loss, and that is that ***this living water has to do with how one connects with God***.

That is a profound truth that is radically different than our culture preaches. Our society is committed to the idea that living water comes from the stuff of this world. God is fine if you think you need that kind of thing, but that’s not relevant for living water. This woman got that we couldn’t be more wrong because God in fact is the source of living water, ***and he is the only source***. It makes sense because he is the only source of life, But Samaritans and Jews disagreed about how one connect with God. Jews believed a person had to go to Jerusalem to worship God and connect with him, Samaritans disagreed.

Jesus cut through all of that and said, “A time is coming and now has come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.” In other words, it doesn’t have to do with rituals, or with specific places or religious practices. In his book, *Authentic Christianity*, Ray Stedman wrote that one mark of false religion, including false Christianity, “is that it is always deeply concerned with the importance of things: stones, rituals, ceremonies, buildings, stained glass windows, spires, organs, proper procedures.”

Jesus claimed that a time was coming, and indeed, in his person had already arrived, when God would make clear that those things are not what he cared about. Jesus said God seeks people who worship in spirit and truth. The grammar indicates those are not two ideas, but one. Jesus meant worship isn’t about outward rituals, but it is about what’s really going on inside a person.

True worshipers will worship in spirit, meaning from the heart. I have read and heard elaborate theological explanations of what it means to worship in spirit and truth. But we need to think about the historical context of Jesus’ statement. The woman Jesus was speaking with was not theologically trained. She was not extensively educated. She was a simple woman. Jesus expected her to understand what he meant with no further explanation. And it is clear that she did understand it. That means we should expect Jesus’ statement to have a pretty simple meaning.

Jesus was saying that worshiping God, connecting to him, is not a thing of religious rules and practices. It is not a complicated thing. It is a simple thing of faith from the heart. In fact, the woman immediately got it. She said, “I know that Messiah is coming and when he comes he will explain everything to us.” Right, she understood that worshiping in spirit and truth had to do with trusting in Messiah when he comes, believing in him from the heart. Jesus said, “I am he.” The woman believed him, and according to verses 28-29 went and told everyone in town about him.

IMPLICATIONS

IT IS POSSIBLE TO HAVE LIVING WATER

Jesus claimed that he would make it possible for people to not thirst. The thirst he referred to clearly had to do with life. It is having a spring of water welling up inside to eternal life. In other words, it is a life that wells up inside us even now and will continue welling up eternally. It is a life that is going to continue even after we die.

This life is one of satisfaction and fulfillment. It does not leave us always looking for something more, feeling the thirst for something that we do not have. The imagery Jesus used is quite vivid. If a person has this life he or she will not be looking for something else. He or she will have what they need and desire.

What is this living water like? My first thought is that it is a life in which a person is always happy, never sad or down. After all, if we are unhappy or sad or discouraged we will not be satisfied, but will want something better. We will thirst for something else, won’t we? But is that realistic? Do you know anyone who has life like that?

Jesus said that this life will be “in” those who have it welling up to eternal life. It is something on the inside, not on the outside. In other words, it has nothing to do with circumstances. It is a quality of life on the inside that will be there regardless of what circumstances one might face. It is a life one will bring to one’s circumstances not derive from them. It is a life that will sustain a person in every circumstance.

Whoever drinks of this water will not thirst again. So a person who has this life won’t need to go get more of it. They will have all they need. In other words, this life that Jesus promised is one that is enough, that a person will have a sense of satisfaction and contentment with. They won’t be restlessly looking for something else.

A couple of weeks ago Laurie and I were at the cancer center for my second attempt at treatment. It is not much fun. No one was happy to be there. Everyone there is going through difficult times and are stressed. At one point Laurie and I were talking about Mexican restaurants because we initially thought maybe we’d go to one for dinner that night. At one point Laurie said, “There’s that one, oh, what’s the name of it? Uh, you know, it has the same name as the fertilizer.” I was completely stumped. I had no idea what she was talking about. A Mexican restaurant with the same name as fertilizer. I couldn’t imagine what she was talking about. Then she said, “You know. Remember the commercial that had a big mountain of fertilizer.” She was right. I did know. As soon as she said it I got it. She was referring to a TV commercial from 40 years ago that featured a 100 foot high pile of fertilizer and a guy skiing down it. “You mean Bandini mountain? Oh, are you talking about Casa De Bandini?” She immediately started laughing and said, “Yes! That’s it.” The connection between fertilizer and that restaurant combined with seeing Laurie laughing caused me to start laughing. We were in a cancer center, which is about as serious as it gets, and the two of us were laughing hysterically. No one else there was laughing.

I tell you that because it illustrates in a way what Jesus was talking about. Being married to Laurie creates a way of living. It is a way of living in which there is great comfort, encouragement, strength, love and joy. That life is there even when we are in circumstances that we would avoid if at all possible. Whatever else may happen to me, I am satisfied, happy with that life because of Laurie. It makes everything better. It makes some hard things bearable. Would I prefer not to be in that situation? Of course. But living with Laurie brings so much comfort, love and even joy that it strengthens me in the circumstance.

That’s what the living water Jesus promised us is like. It doesn’t mean life will be unicorns and roses all the time. It doesn’t mean we won’t feel the stress of hard times or the pain of losses and griefs. But it means in the midst of it all there is comfort, encouragement, strength, love, joy, hope, meaning to all of it. There is enough that we will be satisfied with our lives regardless of our circumstances. It is something that will flow inside us and sustain us through all that happens in life.

LIVING WATER IS AVAILABLE TO EVERY HUMAN BEING

This incident would have caused Jesus’ first followers considerable heartburn. They could not understand why he made a specific point of talking to this woman. She was a woman. And she was a Samaritan. And she was a woman with an unsavory track record. What would people think if she and others like her became part of Jesus’ movement? They would want no part of it.

But Jesus had a very specific reason for reaching this woman. He knocked down barriers. It didn’t matter if she was a woman. It didn’t matter if she was a despised Samaritan. It didn’t even matter if she had a very checkered moral past. Jesus just bulldozed through all those barriers.

He did that because he wanted his followers, including us, to get the picture that anyone can have this living water, regardless of what other people might think. Most of us struggle with a sense that we are inadequate, unacceptable. The point of this story is that if Jesus could rescue that woman and she could enter the kingdom of God and have living water, then he certainly can do the same for us. No matter how badly we might feel like we have failed, we are still within his reach. That woman could receive living water, and that reminds us that we can too. Furthermore, that is true of everyone, regardless of their social status, race, gender, failures, flaws, shortcomings or anything else.

NEITHER RELIGION NOR THE WORLD CAN GIVE LIVING WATER

This woman initially was focused on one thing. She wanted to make her hard life a little bit easier. Running water and indoor plumbing would have been a dream come true for her. As much as that might have made her life a bit easier, it would not give her living water. At some point she would find herself needing the real thing and lacking it.

The same was true of religion. It might seem strange to think about this, but this woman was religious. She had her religion and she knew how it was different from the religion of the Jews. But her religion had not given her living water either. It would never be able to do that.

We need to learn from this woman’s experience. The same is true for us. No amount of the stuff of this world can give us living water. Neither can religion. The world and religion will always leave us with a sense that there is something more, something better, and we need it.

TRUE WORSHIP OF JESUS IS THE SOURCE OF LIVING WATER

Jim Nicodem is a pastor of a megachurch back in Illinois and an author. He says, “You were designed to be a worshipper and you will never experience lasting significance or satisfaction in life if you neglect worship. Nothing else can take the place that worship is intended to fill in your life.” Writer A. W. Tozer said, “Without worship, we go about miserable.”

That is a stark contrast. We have a choice between lasting significance and satisfaction in life on the one hand, and being miserable on the other. There’s a commercial for a bank that I’ve seen repeatedly on television. It extols the virtues of this particular bank and then the spokesman says that making the choice to use that bank is “the easiest decision in the history of decisions.” That is followed by a scene in which a recreation team manager must choose between just a guy named Derek on his team, and all time baseball great Derek Jeter as a pinch hitter. Not a hard choice. One would think the choice between lasting satisfaction and misery would really be the easiest decision in the history of decisions.

Yet people continually make the wrong decision. How many people do you know who experience living water? It is rare to find someone who has that “living water” kind of life. The more common experience is people are looking for something, restless. Yet Jesus said it is available to us. The problem is we look in the wrong places for it. It comes from worship. But not just any worship. If you worship Jobu, the voodoo idol from the classic movie, *Major League*, you will never get living water. If you worship money or success you will never have living water. If you worship yourself you will never have living water. Jesus’ point in this incident is that living water only comes through worshiping him in spirit and truth. Not just going through the motions, not performing religious rituals, but actually loving and honoring Jesus with everything that is in you, beginning with your heart.

To worship means to declare the worth of something. It is to say in actions and words, “this is more valuable than anything else.” To worship Jesus in spirit and truth is to say with our words and our actions, he is more valuable than anything else. It is genuine, from the heart, and is the most important thing in life.

Here’s the great promise. If we will worship Jesus in spirit and truth, we will have living water. We will have life gushing out from within us. We can have a life that while not perfect, will be full of meaning, satisfaction, fulfillment, love, hope, strength, encouragement and peace. It will be a life you can be satisfied with and rejoice in every day. As long as we look for living water in other things, we will lack it. To the degree that we look for it by worshiping Jesus in spirit and truth we will find it.

Do you remember when you were a kid and your group was going to play a game, whether it was football, kickball, baseball, basketball, hockey? Two captains were chosen, then they took turns selecting players for their teams. Did you ever experience the humiliation as one by one others were chosen but you weren’t? Worse, did you ever experience being the last one chosen, meaning you weren’t chosen at all, you were just all that was left. Think of something like that happening to you as an adult in your chosen profession. You’ve likely heard the story, but later today a guy who had something like that happen to him will take center stage. His name is Brock Purdy. In the 2022 NFL draft he was taken with the very last pick. Every year the player drafted in that spot is given the title Mr. Irrelevant, because everyone knows he has little to no chance to make an NFL team. Most people thought that draft choice was a throwaway. Brock Purdy was not highly regarded, to say the least. But he surprised people. He battled his way onto the roster of the San Francisco 49’ers as their third string quarterback. When the first two quarterbacks got injured most people thought the 49ers promising season was ruined. But Mr. Irrelevant went on a tear that no one outside that team saw coming, leading them to 7 straight wins including one playoff victory so far. Good for him.

But here’s why I recite his story. Listen to what Brock says. “Every time I play, no matter what happens, I want others to see God through my actions. Every time I step on the field I want to bring him glory. Even when we lose I point to God and thank him for the opportunity. Everything happens for a reason, it’s all a lesson from the Lord. It’s a game, not my life.” He is seeking to worship in spirit and truth, doing what he needs to do to have living water flowing from within.