

Quenching Our Thirst for Life

Rev. David Reynolds

John 4: 5-42

The commercial shows two twenty-somethings a guy and a girl sitting several feet away from each other on a city bench perhaps at a bus stop. They obviously are strangers, but the guy wants to figure out a way to meet this girl and make a good impression. He begins singing a short tune over and over again, meant to imitate the sound of a cell phone ring tone of some kind. The girl throws a couple of strange glances at him, but he continues until finally he reaches into his back pack and pulls out a bottle of coke. He twists the top, which stops his fake ring tone and holds it up to his ear like it is his phone. "Hello," he says. Then he takes the bottle of coke and holds it out to the girl, saying "It's for you."

The commercial is selling coke as being something a lot more than just a drink to quench your thirst, isn't it? Because lots of things can quench your thirst, but what we're really thirsty for is life, fullness of life and relationship and experiences that offer us hope for that fullness of life. So, the text from John's gospel speaks of the thirst for life. This Samaritan woman who's at the well isn't content with her life. It is as parched and dry and harsh as the desert land in which she lives. John's original hearers would have been better able to know that than we are from some of the details he includes. First of all, it's noon. It's in the heat of the day, and she's alone. Why wouldn't she have been alone then? It's the last time of the day women would have wanted to do heavy lifting and hard walk back into the village when weighed down with buckets of water across their backs. The other women went in the early morning or in the cool of the evening. And their drudgery would have at least been shared drudgery. They would enjoy their fellowship together.

No, this woman goes at noon because she wanted to avoid their company. She was a double outcast, an outcast even among a whole group of outcasts, the Samaritans. She had heard the whispers and had seen the sidelong glances, and sometimes the out and out stares. Having been used and discarded by so many men in the village, she knew what the other women were saying about her. It would have been a hard life to live, a hard life in which to be content. But, more than that, her own choices speak of her discontent. Her own choices speak of a life of thirst, don't they? They speak of her own unquenched thirst for fullness of life and relationship, love. Five husbands and the one she's living with now is not her husband. Her life is an open book of all the ways she's tried unsuccessfully to quench her real thirst. She can't be content with her life.

Well, if her life is an open book of all her unsuccessful attempts to quench her real thirst, ours are too. Certainly the people at Coke know that. The people at Budweiser and Coors know that. The tobacco companies know that. The car manufacturers know it. They try to sell us their product by selling it as somehow a door into a fulfilled life. And, the other side of that is, we buy those things for just those same reasons, in spite of ourselves. We keep looking don't we? Like this woman going through husband after husband, and the men using women like her, in search of something we never seem to find.

Sometimes we search like that through relationships, don't we? We search for life through politics, and through weaponry, and through religion as something we can manipulate. We can't manipulate God and hopefully through our practice of religion, we *finally* come to realize that. But, a lot of times we don't, do we? Because we can and do manipulate religion. And the problem is that all our desperate attempts to quench our thirst for life, all the ways we choose and can manipulate, eventually land us in shame. We end up shaming ourselves and each other. I mean really, because somewhere inside us, we know better. And so, we're ashamed for having made these choices that we knew better than to make. And you know what happens when we are ashamed? We become people who shame and hurt and do violence to

others—whom we project our shame onto. Those ashamed of being bullied become bullies. Those ashamed of being abused become abusers.

And we bring those same cycles into our politics and we bring them into our religion as well. That's what I mean by manipulating religion. I mean, have you known...do you know “church-damaged” people...people who have had some of their most painful experiences of being shamed and humiliated in church, in the name of God? I do. And I know of some preachers and evangelists who are seriously limited in their ability to be people who really proclaim the good news of God's love so that others can experience it because of their concern to make sure sinners know just how shameful their behavior is. God help me if I've ever been one of them. But, the thing is, that's a cyclical thing. Because we're ashamed of the choices we've made, we shame and hurt and do violence to others, all in the name of making sure we and they “get it right.” And our endless discontent and thirst for real life continues.

How do we ever stop that cycle? Our lives are open books of our endless unsuccessful attempts to quench our thirst, like this woman. But listen. This woman met Jesus and it changed her life. Here's the thing, Jesus speaks to her. And you understand, you remember, that men spoke to women directly and in public like that only if they were related by blood, or as a proposition. That's why when his disciples return they are astonished Jesus is talking to this woman! So, you know why there's tension, there's an edge in this exchange right from the beginning. Jesus sees this woman who couldn't possibly be more of an outsider than she is and he speaks to her and treats her as an insider, indeed as an intimate friend. And it's all for the purpose of quenching her real thirst, of finally bringing contentment and fulfillment in her life.

Listen, Jesus doesn't bring up her past in order to shame her. We need to get that clear. He doesn't bring up her past in order to shame her. He brings it up in order to free her from its grip. The truth is he's already broken through all the taboos of shame and who's right and who's wrong, and who's acceptable and who's not, by speaking to her in the first place. So, he's already said, in effect, you are a person of dignity and worth. You are a person worth my time and attention. And so by bringing up her past, the truth is she is set free from its power over her, the power of shame. The truth is, having been accepted and valued as she is, she can stop that cycle of shame and shaming that she and all those around her are caught up in.

Now, she doesn't quite get it, at first, does she? She thinks some more shame might be in store for her around the whole Samaritan practice of religion thing. She thinks it might still come down to somehow “getting it right.” But, instead Jesus says, in me, right now, the time is here when what you're called and where you worship doesn't matter...in a Baptist church, a synagogue, a mosque, or on a mountaintop somewhere. What matters is *who* you are and how you live your life. What matters is worshiping God “in spirit and in truth,” or as Eugene Peterson translates that what matters is being simply and *honestly yourself* before God. “God is sheer being itself – Spirit. Those who worship... must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration. That's what matters ... not how or where... not “getting it right.” And she gets it.

Despite all the bad choices she's made in all her desperate attempts to quench her thirst for life, there's no shame. She can be herself before God. Even so, she's acceptable. She who once had so assimilated the shame foisted on her, that she went alone to draw water at noon, is now bold enough to demand this living water Jesus is offering, for herself. And so, by the end of the conversation, she's forgotten her bucket and run back into town unashamed to be seen and heard, because she has amazing news. She's met a savior! She's met someone who told her everything she'd ever done and didn't flinch, who told her not for the sake of shame, but for the sake of freedom.

Friends, that love of us, as we are, in spite of all the things we are ashamed of, that love is living water. That love can become the very source of life for us, it can become something that feeds us and quenches our real thirst. How do we stop those cycles of being ashamed and shaming and hurting ourselves and others in turn? Jesus stops them. "For while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. ... while we were still sinners Christ died for us." Jesus took on the most *shameful* death that the noblest society and noblest religion had to offer at the time. Crucified, nailed naked to a cross, as a traitor to his country and to his religion. Shameful. And God raised him up to say to them, and to say to us: There is no shame. The most shamed in the world is valued and treasured by me.

Friends there is nothing else, I think, that can transform us and this world, nothing else that can save us, that can set us free from the endless cycles of shame and violence we are caught in otherwise. But, in Christ, God has done just that. Have a bottle of living water and pass it to your neighbor. It's for you.

Amen.