

Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church

Lake Worth, Florida

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SATISFYING A PERSISTENT THIRST

A few years ago when teaching one of my college classes, we were discussing mental and physical health as an issue of individual moral responsibility. The exploration took an unexpected direction when a student consensus seemed to emerge that unnecessary risk taking and the resulting “rush” were more important than considering possible side effects and negative - even disastrous - consequences. There were no clear-cut explanations for the thirst for repeated rushes, the continual quest for highs, and the repetitive search for peak experiences. The class pointed out that for people of all ages there are several methods for bringing on some kind of rush, such as the use of various chemicals, engaging in certain sports such as boxing and sky diving, or watching a game such as the Super Bowl.

After class, my mind jumped to the many other activities in which a few participate and many watch intently. The public jumps from holiday to holiday, from game to game, from concert to concert, from fair to fair, from movie to movie with an unquenchable thirst for increasingly exhilarating entertainment. So-called reality television has become popular. The riskier and more heart pounding the event, all the better. Get that adrenaline rush going!

I later recalled a mediocre college dean of instruction. He actually created so many battles that the faculty readily perceived his preference for ongoing combat. Regrettably, his overall style was “management by crisis.” When things were going well, the faculty just waited. We knew that peace could not last; we would not be able to focus on our teaching for long. When he needed another fix, he would create unnecessary wars.

Even some religious groups try to market their ministries by “feel good” standards. As one clergyman’s wife cynically commented to me about their congregation: *“They just want to be entertained and get high on whatever they think is ‘spirituality.’ To have a successful church, you have to have gimmicks, toys, lots of busy activities, and assure them that they’re O.K. In any case, do not challenge their childish beliefs or values. Wave the American flag, smile and hug – do all this, and you’ll have a successful church.”* Ironically, some churches do offer an overabundance of groups searching for more and better “spiritualities” – a rush of imaginary holiness. Never mind that deeper thirsts go unsatisfied!

The sad consequence for those who thirst for one rush after another is that they are *never* truly satisfied. Their lives are restless, filled with discontent and anticipating the next rush – wherever it might be. They cannot be tranquil. Between highs, their way of life feels flat, empty, lonely, and stagnant. They eagerly, even anxiously, await the next performance, the next battle, the next high, the next fix among equally needy individuals. They bond together in a futile pursuit of powerless saviors. Such frustrated individuals and superficial gatherings are the very underpinnings of our culture.

Among the many wonderful meanings of tonight’s scripture reading is the symbol of living waters offered by Christ. He promises that those who drink of the water he will give them will never be thirsty. Their lives will never feel flat, empty, stagnant, or wanting. They will need no temporary fix, no artificial rush, and no additional sanctity.

I suppose Jesus could have said to the woman at the well a sarcastic “Get a life, lady.” However, he patiently taught her heart, mind, and spirit that there is an alternative to her present unsatisfactory circumstances. A central feature of the story is her search for greater meaning in her life. *Meaning is so crucial that there is no satisfaction of thirst without a profound resolution to the quest for meaning.*

How do you and I quench our thirst? By desperately gulping at the water? No, we would probably choke. Instead, one’s thirst is truly quenched with one sip at a time - and not all at one sitting. *First*, we recognize Jesus Christ as God’s Exemplar, as God’s own clue to what life is all about. *Second*, we choose to accept Jesus’ invitation to live in a mutually caring, ever evolving fellowship with God and neighbor. *Third*, in a trusting, reverential relationship with the Creator unhurriedly nurtured by prayer and corporate worship, we open ourselves to God’s Spirit - a Spirit that steadily provides us with essential comfort, basic strength, vital love, crucial refreshment, and the greatest joy.

This fellowship among God, neighbor and oneself as lived by Jesus *is the Way* the Creator intends human beings to live. No longer thirsty, no longer pursuing rush after rush, no longer feeling alone, we become fully integrated as a whole and unified person, knowing a fulfilled life in all its height and depth and power. We are incorporated - not among a hollow, fanatical, frenzied assembly of pretentious strangers - but within an imperfect people of God, or in other words, the very fallible church.

This is not to say that life then becomes a bed of roses. Even within Christian fellowship there are disappointments, nuisances, uncertainties, a degree of discord, tragedies, and, of course, the separations resulting from death. Additionally, fun-filled recreation is not abandoned; but there is a profound difference between the exhilaration of true recreation and the driven addictions for rushes that cannot satisfy basic thirsts.

So, there they are: the thirsty woman at the well and Jesus with his offer of “living waters” – the simple answer to life’s deepest thirsts. Although you and I cannot change the world, or even the small regions in which we move about, we *can* listen, simply and straightforwardly pray both individually and in this fellowship, share the symbolic bread and wine, and in time and with patience have our most essential longings satisfied – all by the Way of Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Excellent Supplement from *THE LIVING PULPIT* (2008)

The story of the Samaritan women in John is rich with implications. One can approach the story from several angles. First, it is no accident that Jesus' encounter is with a woman or that she is a Samaritan woman. This encounter deliberately breaks through two strong cultural prohibitions. What Jesus provides is offered to one who is both a woman and a Samaritan in a way that pushes the envelope of what is normative. The Jesus event shatters barriers that relate to both gender and religious culture.

Second, this long narrative is filled with surprises for the disciples who are amazed that Jesus is talking to a woman and offering "living water" to Samaritans.

Then the metaphor switches from water to food, and Jesus says, "I have food to eat that you do not know about:" (Jn 4:33) Jesus tells the disciples that "my food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work:" (Jn 4:34)

Third, I have heard one theologian comment on the fact that the woman left her water jar and went back to the city to tell others about what she had heard and thus becomes an evangelist while abandoning her primary task of carrying water. From a feminist angle, this text illustrates how a woman

is freed from her assigned task to carry water to become a disciple of the one who indeed provides "living water."

Fourth, one could reflect upon this story from an ecclesiological perspective. How does the church provide the place where men and women are freed from the conventions and constraints of culture to become transformed in the interaction with Jesus? Does the Jesus event shatter the roles and tasks assigned to men and women in our culture and open up invitations to a new life based on a new vision of what it means to be human for both men and women?

Fifth, please note that Jesus was invited to stay in Samaria and did so for two days. Jesus stayed in a foreign territory with a history of conflict and division, and there Jesus offered the "living water." Here again the Gospel breaks through the unexpected and creates a new territory of fellowship. How do enemies become friends? This story provides an entry point for that conversation. Certainly, enemies exist both within and without the church. How do we stay in an uncomfortable and hostile space to make the good news known?

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