

Title: Drinking Living Water

Text: John 4:4-26

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Immanuel Baptist Church

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I am a little over half way through a novel by Wendel Berry entitled Jaber Crow. The novel is written as an autobiography; J. Crow is telling his story. As he reflects on the experiences and events of his life—the mishaps and difficulties, as well as the good times; his coming to his vocation as a barber and his home in Port William—he conveys the belief that somehow through it all he has been led. Perhaps this sense of being led comes close to what the Gospel writer is saying when he says, “Now he (Jesus) had to go through Samaria.” John, I don’t think is saying, that this was forordained or predestined. I think that he is saying that Jesus was led here. In the Jaber Crow story it is after the events and experiences have happened that he gets the impression that he has been led. And maybe that was true of Jesus as well.

Jesus encounters the woman at Jacob’s well at noonday, which is odd. And she is alone. That too is unusual. Normally the women of the village or town would come in groups in the morning or evening—and it was a kind of social gathering. This could suggest that she was not on good terms with the other women in her village and was something of an outcast. But we don’t know.

Jesus initiates the conversation by asking for a drink of water. She is surprised that Jesus would talk with her in public. To do so violates social protocol and convention. For one thing, she is a woman; men did not socialize with women in public. And for another, she is a Samaritan woman. And as John tells us, Jews and Samaritans did not intermingle; they each kept to their own ways and place and tradition. In fact, the animosity between the Jews and Samaritans was deep rooted and bitter.

Also for Jesus, a Jew, to drink from a Samaritan water vessel would have brought ceremonial defilement to Jesus. But Jesus refuses to be defined by these customs and he refuses to be confined to them. He violates social norms and religious law and begins a conversation.

By asking for a drink Jesus is not in any way being condescending. It is actually an act of humility and solidarity—to make the request. The woman is surprised and concerned that Jesus would dare violate these sacred social and religious customs.

Jesus bypasses her concern and gets right to the heart of what he wants to say: “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink of water, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

It is important to note that the gift of God being offered is inseparable from the giver of the gift. The gift and the giver go together. Jesus says to her, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink the water that I will give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

So now we see what Jesus is offering—eternal life. The living water is eternal life. But what is eternal life? If you think you know, be warned—you may fare no better than the woman or Nicodemus in your understanding. It is not “heaven when we die.” Eternal life does indeed transcend death; death is not the end of the story. Mel Blanc is a name associated with characters in Warner Brothers Looney Tunes. When at the end of a production Porky Pig comes across the screen and says, “That’s all folks!” that is the voice of Mel Blanc. When he died his family engraved an inscription on his tombstone that reads, “That’s all folks!” We don’t believe that do we? We believe that life transcends death, but that is not primarily what John’s Gospel means by the expression “eternal life.”

In John 17:3 in a context where Jesus is praying to God, Jesus says, “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” To “know” means to know in relationship. Eternal life, in John’s Gospel, is primarily about being in relationship with God and the living Christ.

Being in relationship is not merely knowing about God or knowing about Christ, but rather, it is participating with them in the kingdom of God on earth. It’s about friendship and partnership and joining Christ’s cause to bring justice and peace and abundance of life to the world.

The idea of “eternal life” in John’s Gospel is very close to what is meant by “the kingdom of God” in the other Gospels. So, in John’s Gospel, the concept of eternal life relates more to this life and this world, than it does the future. It’s about knowing God, being intimately involved and engaged in doing God’s will and sharing God’s love now.

However, when you encounter this expression in Paul’s letters it almost always relates to the future. For Paul it is a future reality; but in John’s Gospel it is a present reality that extends into the future.

This is a good time for a brief lesson in biblical interpretation. Sometimes I hear, “There are so many divisions in the Christian world; if we could just get back to New Testament Christianity”—implying, of course, that there were no divisions then, just a single version. That’s not true. There never was a time when there was a single version of Christianity. New Testament Christianity represents several different perspectives and versions.

People who don't like paradox and contradiction and ambiguity and diversity don't want to hear that—but that's how it was. Paul's version of the faith was not the same as the version presented in the Gospel of John—they represent two different communities and versions of the faith. Now, there is unity too and much overlap—there is much that John's churches and Paul's churches share in common, but there is also diversity and some distinct differences. There never was a single version of Christian faith—there were “versions” from the beginning.

So, in John, eternal life does not emphasize the quantity of life, but the quality of life, the kind of life it is—it is life in relationship, in partnership, with God and with Christ and their purpose in the world.

When Jesus says that those who drink this water will never thirst again, that does not mean that we have no more spiritual longings or desires—as if a relationship grounded in faith satisfies completely all of our spiritual desires and thirsts. It does not. There will be many times in our walk with God when our spiritual thirsts will not feel quenched or satisfied. Jesus is not the answer to all our problems. Sometimes faith in Jesus creates problems. And certainly we still have spiritual longings and desires.

So what does this mean?—“those who drink the water that I give them will never thirst.” It could have several meanings. The phrase “will never thirst” could be translated, “will not be thirsty forever”—meaning that in time all our spiritual thirsts will be satisfied. There are not all satisfied now, but they will be—a day is coming when our spiritual desires will be fulfilled. That's one possible meaning.

In the context John could be talking about the Jewish holiness law. It could mean that the one who finds new life and purpose through a relationship and partnership with Christ will never again thirst for religion that puts the emphasis on holiness laws and rituals. Remember that in the prologue/introduction John says that the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

We really don't have to choose, because if we follow John's own way of telling and interpreting the story, the phrase can have multiple meanings. I like to think of it this way. I still have many spiritual thirsts and desires—as well as doubts and questions. I long to experience more fully the love and grace of God. All my spiritual thirsts are not quenched. But the thirst for meaning is forever satisfied through my relationship with God and Christ. I feel connected through Christ to a larger story—a much bigger story than my little story, a grander purpose and cause. My connection and involvement in that larger story—the kingdom of God—gives my life meaning that is truly satisfying even though I have spiritual thirsts there are not always fulfilled.

In verse 15 the woman responds, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” Like Nicodemus, the Jewish leader, she understands this on a single level—the literal level—and so, like Nicodemus, she fails to understand what Jesus is offering. Jesus is speaking in metaphors and symbols and she is thinking literally. And you know brothers and sisters, this seems to be a common human mistake and can be a huge problem.

How much evil has been done in the name of Christianity and in the name of Christ by taking the Bible literally? A literal reading of the Bible has been used to suppress civil rights, equal rights, and creation rights. It has been used to support slavery and to hold women in subjection as an inferior gender. It has been used to foster fear, guilt, shame and prejudice. It has been used to sow seeds of hate and intolerance more so than any other book. These people revere the Bible, but they dishonor God and the Christian faith.

Beware sisters and brothers of those who preach the Bible, but do not preach or practice love. The Spirit of God and of Christ is the Spirit of love. And the Spirit of love stands over the Bible and must guide its interpretation and application. If not, then the Bible can easily become an instrument for evil. Remember, the Devil quoted the Bible to Jesus.

In the next part of the conversation between Jesus and the woman Jesus draws closer. Jesus says, “Go get your husband.” And she says, “I have no husband.” And Jesus says, “You are right. But you have had five husbands and the man you now have is not your husband (and who knows, maybe he was some other woman’s husband, we don’t know).

But Jesus is not condemning her. John says in 3:17 after the discussion with Nicodemus that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it—to rescue it from its own self-destruction. Jesus’ intention is not to lay on this woman a guilt trip—but rather, to show her God’s unconditional love. Jesus has already violated his own social and religious taboos in reaching out to this woman. Now he’s taking it a step further. He wants her to know and experience God’s unconditional love.

How different is this than some versions of Christianity you and I know? Sad to say, that there are Christian people who wouldn’t give this woman time of day. They would say, “hell is what she deserves” and be done with it.

Jesus is embodying John 3:16 that says, “For God so loved the world . . .” And now we see how personal that love is. Jesus has accepted her as she is. The question is: Can she accept God’s acceptance and let God’s love and acceptance change her life? Guilt and shame and fear and threats of punishment do not save. They may successfully alter a person’s behavior for a season, but it will not change their life. Only the love of God can heal and make a person whole. Only love fully redeems. Only love transforms.

The woman, at this point, recognizes the truth in Jesus' words and in the amazing insight into her life. She feels comfortable enough with Jesus to bring up the subject of worship and a discussion follows which Jesus brings right back to the real issue. The Samaritans worship at Mount Gerazim; the Jews worship at Jerusalem. But the time has now come to make clear that you can meet God anywhere. Any place can be a holy place, because any place is a place to meet God. God is Spirit and when you come to God in sincerity and authenticity, honestly and truthfully, you can meet and know God any time and any place—which is eternal life.

The well of living water never runs dry. Come and drink. The invitation is to all of us. Drink the water of unconditional love, the living water of forgiveness and hope. It's healing, refreshing water.

O God, as we share together in holy communion in remembrance of Jesus' self-giving unto death and in celebration of his risen life among us and in us, may we open our hearts to you and receive your great love and forgiveness as we renew our commitment to be agents of your love and forgiveness in the world. In the name of our Lord Jesus we pray. Amen.