

March 19, 2017 – Third Sunday of Lent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 4:5-42

God's Thirst

Jesus tells a woman, whom he meets at a well, that he is a well that springs up eternally. Jesus tells a woman, who is coming for water, that he has water to give. Jesus says if anyone drinks his water they'll never again be thirsty. If Jesus is going to say all that, why does he ask for a drink? If Jesus has access to an everlasting spring, why is he sitting by a well talking to someone drawing water? If Jesus has living water, why is he thirsty?

Part of the answer is that Jesus is fully human. That's part of the reason that Jesus is thirsty. Jesus' full humanity is an important part of the gospel in general and of this story in particular. Jesus, the Messiah, who is called the Christ, is also a human being, who experienced all that humans do in general—being thirsty, being tired—and in particular: particular to the life he lived, there and then. Jesus lived in hot, dry land in a time when travel was physically taxing—no cars, no planes; for him no camels or chariots, either. At the time Jesus lived, the station in life that he occupied, a journey meant hours on foot, walking across at hot dry land. He spend the morning doing that, now it was the hottest part of the day, noon, and he was tired.

That's part of the reason he was thirsty, that's part of the reason Jesus asked her for a drink. In becoming fully human, God knows that physical desire for something so elemental and refreshing, restoring. And God knows that parched feeling, that sapped strength, that need for a thing without which we die, a critical need and a lack thereof, which so many in our world share. God in Jesus shares that, too.

God's thirst is about that—and more than that, too. Jesus is fully human, and fully divine. Jesus is fully in unity with, is of the same substance as the God who was revealed to Moses. You remember what God said to Moses, from the burning bush, when Moses asked God's name? God said, "Here's my name: I AM.... I AM what I AM." That's also what Jesus says in the gospel story today when the woman asks who Jesus is. When you translate his reply precisely it's not "I am he," it's "I AM" an incredible announcement that echoes Exodus, God's self-revelation. First I AM statement in a gospel chock full of them, said to a woman at a well, Jesus says to her, "I am God."

So why ask for a drink? God made water, in the very beginning. John's gospel says that the Word was there, in the beginning, when God separated the waters, marked the dry land at its edges, traced rivers, scooped out lakes, inserted springs and seas. Why would God ask for water, which is his, for he made it. Why would God ask for a drink? Almost as if God needed our help, which God does not. God, by definition, is ultimately, and uniquely, self-sufficient. God is what God is.

And yet in Jesus God asks for a drink, from a woman. A woman with a past, no less—that part about her husbands. Some historical and present day interpreters have construed this past in salacious ways, with sometimes sordid extrapolations on her sexual history. It's important to remember, though, that back then a woman couldn't obtain a divorce; it wasn't allowed, it was against the law. A man divorced her, or died on her, or abandoned her—particularly if she was unable to produce an heir. It's also important to note that in all their long conversation, Jesus never says to her: "Repent," or "Your sins are forgiven," which Jesus regularly says in other stories. Contrary to how it is sometimes interpreted, this story seems to

me to be more about Jesus seeing someone whom others have not seen, or do not want to see, maybe even someone who does not want to be seen—why else would she draw water, in the hottest part of the day? Why else does she hide her past? But Jesus sees her, has a conversation with her, a conversation he begins by asking for a drink.

The disciples are shocked by this, as we later hear. Their shock comes because of the one thing that they know about her: that she is a woman. Back then, men and women didn't interact like that, like peers. Back then woman and men were not considered equal. A lot has changed, thanks be to God, but a lot still has to change. A little over a week ago was International Women's Day—maybe you heard some of the statistics about disparities in representation and pay, or how women's ideas may be ignored until they are repeated by a man. Note, then, the striking contrast that the gospel makes when you compare last week's gospel story with this one. Last week, we had a learned man named Nicodemus who comes to Jesus by night, and in the course of a conversation Nicodemus has less and less to say. Today we have woman, who probably never even had a chance to go to school, who isn't even named, but with whom Jesus speaks in the middle of the day—and as they speak she has many lines, she has much to say! Much to ask, much to challenge, much to learn—and then much to share. Having spoken with Jesus, she keeps speaking. We hear how she leaves her water jug and hurries to tell everyone, "Come and see." Which are the very same words that Jesus used, earlier in John's gospel when he was calling disciples.

She's a disciple. Meanwhile, the other disciples are confused. They're confused in the first place that Jesus is talking to a woman, though they don't dare admit their confusion (another contrast with the woman at the well, who admits she doesn't have it all figured out), and then these other disciples are confused about who packed Jesus' lunch. I love this little interlude—it feels like pure comic relief. I can never read what the disciples say without hearing the voice of an anxious mother, "Rabbi, eat something!" It's as if those disciples are just thinking with their stomachs—Jesus gets, too. Because while Jesus could have said to them, "Have I eaten? That's not the metaphor I'm working here, not food, drink!" instead Jesus says, "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me." Instead Jesus says, "You need me to use the metaphor of food? I can work with that, too."

Because that's the way that God works, in Jesus: with us. God asks for a drink, because God is thirsty for us, thirsty to converse with us, thirsty to be in relationship with us, thirsty to involve us in a new way of life, a new way of being that is still being created. God is so intent on including us in this new creation that he continues this story from a cross. Where he also says, "I thirst."

We all have a past. We all have things we've done, and things that have been done to us. God thirsts for a future for us, a future with us. At a well, God asks for a drink from a woman; as God asked for a womb, from a woman, as at an empty tomb, God asks, women and men, "Go and tell who I AM."