

WELL OF LIVING WATER

Several years ago, I read a biography of Alexander the Great. My reading choices are sort of widespread; I like to read books on a number of topics. I found this book fascinating. I would recommend it to anyone interested in history.

If you know anything about history, you will know that Alexander the Great was a great general. That's true. He was. For as long as he continued on, he conquered all in his path. What surprised me was the way that his conquests finally ended. Eventually, his conquests spread so far and so wide, and his armies had marched so far, that they mutinied. His troops just refused to march any farther from home. After that, things began to unravel quickly for Alexander.

One of the keys to Alexander's success as a general was his ability to keep his troops supplied. In that day and age, the easiest way to move supplies was by ship. He was in India along the banks of the Indus river. So, his plan was to march down the Indus River to the sea, then back along the coast where his ships could reach his troops.

At first his plan was a success. He made it to the sea just fine. After that, things didn't go as planned. He arrived at the time of year that the winds were working against his ships. So, they couldn't rendezvous with his troops. That forced him to delay his departure. When his troops finally did set out and he began his march home, he discovered that the terrain along the coast was impassable because of mountains. This forced his troops to turn inland into some of the most forbidding desert in the world. Thousands of his troops died in the desert, mostly from dehydration.

At one point during the march a soldier found a small well of muddy, foul-smelling water. So, he took off his helmet, filled it with the water, and took it to Alexander. This was the only water for miles around. The book records that Alexander looked at the helmet, glanced around at his thirsty troops, and then laughing, took the water and dumped it on the ground. He then promised his troops, "I don't drink until you do."

I was reminded of this story when I saw today's passage. According to this story, Jesus passed into Samaria, and he reached a well that had been dug by Jacob. While he was there a woman came up to the well to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."

Now this surprised the woman. She replied, "How is it that you, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" In parenthesis it says Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. I think this is an important detail. In fact, by the standards of the culture of that day, everything about this interaction is improper. Jews had no dealings with Samaritans in that day. Men had no dealings with women who were not members of their own family in public. These things were considered improper in that culture. Most people in Jesus' position in that day would have felt that they were the superior party. So, it's not surprising that the woman questions why Jesus would talk to her.

Jesus continued, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." His reply begs the question. What is living water? What does that mean?

I looked it up, and what I found in my text was that living water- literally taken- means something like rushing water- something like the water you would get from a stream. But somehow that doesn't seem to capture for me what Jesus is saying here.

The text continues. The woman said, " Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

Jesus answered her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but those who drink of the water I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give them will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

The woman said, "Sir, give me this water so that I will never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said, "Go, call your husband, and come back."

The woman answered him, "I have no husband."

Jesus said, "You are right, saying, 'I have no husband,'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

Then the woman said, "Sir, I perceive you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say people must worship in Jerusalem."

Jesus said, "Woman believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

The Woman said to him, "I know that the Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Now, just at this moment, the disciples arrived. They are astonished that he was speaking to a woman, but no one asked him, "What do you seek?" or "Why are you speaking to her?"

To me, this is a marvelous passage. There is so much that I could make of it, but what I chose to focus on today, was that it gives Christians a guide for dealing with diversity. It gives us a guide for dealing with people who are different from us. That's important, I think, because while the church has done many things well over the last 2,000 years, we have never really learned to deal with diversity. Honestly, Islam deals with diversity better than Christianity does. Their solution is to turn everyone into an Arab. Sort of like the melting pot approach.

Christianity doesn't do that. For 2,000 years a faction of the church has been saying that the church should have a "big tent". That we should take in everyone we possibly can. That seems to be a big piece of the scriptural message. That we should take everyone in that we possibly can. On the other hand, for the same 2,000 years there has been an element of the church that has been rebelling against that. That has been using our faith as a reason to exclude. We have found all kinds of reasons to divide people into groups: race, gender, wealth, ethnicity, etc.

In the Ancient Middle East there were also lots of ways to divide people, too. There were Greeks, Romans, Jews, Samaritans- just to list a few. They all sought to exclude one another. They all thought they were better than the other. They often had no dealings with one another, each group thinking they were superior to the other.

That situation makes what Jesus does here remarkable. Jesus broke every single social norm of that society. Not just in this story, but throughout every story. In this story, for example, he was a Jew speaking to a Samaritan- a man speaking publicly to a woman. You didn't do that! It wasn't considered polite. It wasn't considered normal. In fact, it may have been considered kind of creepy.

Yet he offers her living water. He's not afraid to interact with her. In this story, God is making a statement that the gift of eternal life- or that "living water," if you will- is available to everyone. This is a truly revolutionary statement for that day. God's grace cannot be contained by social or cultural convention. It is everywhere! It is available to everyone!

What strikes me is that when the disciples return, they don't get it. Especially for the Gospel of John, this is not unusual. The more I read the Gospel of John, the I realize that one of the functions of the disciples is to be hapless. They are the most bone-headed idiots you ever run across. If I had to ask a question of Christ, my question would be, "Why did you pick these guys? Couldn't you have found anybody that was smarter than this to help you out?" But, maybe that's the point. We're all inferior when it comes to God.

Anyway, the disciples show a perfect example of that in this particular passage. They don't say anything; I guess that's because by this time they have gotten used to Jesus doing some things that they just don't understand. But we are given some insight into what they think. "Why is he speaking to her? She's a Samaritan, and a woman, for that matter." This is what is going on in their minds, and the bible tells us this is what they are thinking.

Going back to the story about Alexander the Great, when he took that helmet of polluted water, and he saw the thirst of his soldiers, he laughed and dumped the water onto the ground. That was a noble gesture. The disciples are given pure, sweet, living water by our Lord Jesus, and they metaphorically dump it on the ground, because they are hanging on to society's judgment of things rather than listening to where God is trying to lead them. They think they're superior.

Brothers and Sisters, Jesus offers us an endless supply of living water. Now, there are two points of view that need to be considered. The first is the view of the woman. She seems to think she is not as worthy to receive the water as others. She's wrong. She is just as worthy- or unworthy- as anyone else.

I tell you that because I want to make the same point about you. So are you. Whoever you are, whatever your life situation, that living water is available for you. There is no one better than you, save Jesus. There is no one who deserves it more than you do. The supply is endless. Drink up! It's waiting there for you.

The second point of view that needs to be considered is that of the disciples. They arrive and are astonished. It seems that this is because they are looking down upon the woman. They think she's unworthy- that Jesus shouldn't waste his time on her. Especially since there are twelve perfectly orthodox candidates right there to follow Jesus. They are also wrong! They are no better than her! They are no worse! They are just as worthy- or unworthy- as anyone else.

So are you. Whoever you are, whatever your life situation, that living water is available to you, but it's just as available to the person sitting next to you, or to the person sitting a few rows behind you, or a few rows in front of you, or to the people who are outside our walls. It's available to everyone else. You are not better than anyone else, nor are you worse. You don't deserve the living water more than others; nor you do deserve it less. The supply is endless! Drink up, but don't object if Jesus serves others too. That's his task. That's his job. He loves them just as much as he loves you. He loves you, just as much as he loves them.