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John 4:5-42

PARCHED

Have you ever been so parched, so in need of a drink of water that you could think of nothing else? The Hebrew people knew a deep thirst. They had been delivered from slavery in Egypt. But now they are in the dry wilderness without any water in sight. Their throats were dry, their tongues were swollen, their lips were cracked, and they cried out to Moses for water.

Sometimes it is possible to be parched and not even know it. In Arizona where I grew up, it is so dry that it is said that if you wait until you *feel* thirsty to drink, you are already dehydrated. The dry air and the sun just suck the moisture from your body without you even realizing it. You don't even have to be exercising or sweating to become dehydrated. You can just be going about your day, doing ordinary things, driving around town doing errands, unaware that a vital component to your wellbeing is evaporating right from your body.

I wonder if this happens to us more often than we realize. We are going about our daily lives, doing ordinary things, all the while a vital component to our wellbeing is evaporating from within us. The daily grind of getting up and rushing to complete our overly scheduled day gradually wears us down. The ugliness of this world--the unkindness we may experience from our boss or colleagues, the rudeness of other drivers, the cruelty we read about in the papers-- little by little it saps something vital from within us. Our personal struggles with health, our efforts to care for loved ones, our relationship issues, our personal worries and struggles may leave us depleted. Perhaps we find ourselves quick to grumble or complain or to take offense, and without realizing it, little by little, joy, gratitude, and contentment, evaporate away. And we become parched people without even realizing it.

The woman Jesus meets at the well was a parched woman. She has come to draw water from the well--an ordinary, daily chore that all women would have carried out in the course of the daily activities. But Jesus sees this woman and understands that her thirst is greater than a physical thirst. He sees someone who is parched spiritually and emotionally.

The Christian church has traditionally characterized this woman as a person of loose morals. After all, we are told that she was married five times and that the man she is currently living with was not even her husband. But this interpretation fails to appreciate the culture and traditions of the time. It also assumes this woman had free agency--the freedom to make choices which she, living in that era, simply would not have had.

Rather, it is likely this woman's lengthy marital history reflects her personal tragedies--that she had been widowed or divorced multiple times and had been passed around from one male family member to another as was the custom of their day. And even though she had no choice in the matter, her marital history nevertheless probably incurred the judgment of others in her community. We've seen that happen to women throughout history, haven't we? Women get raped, and the community judges them or shames them. That's probably how it was with this Samaritan woman. Notice the time of day she comes to the well to draw water. It is high noon. The other village women would have come together in the morning and enjoyed the chance to visit with each other. But she comes by herself in the heat of the day. Her disorderly life has brought the judgment of others and they have ostracized her from their companionship.

But this woman's disorderly life was not the only difficulty in her life. She was a Samaritan. And Jews and Samaritans despised each other. They were feuding cousins whose animosity centered around religious differences. According to the conventions of their day, Jesus should not have been speaking with her. He certainly should not drink from any cup she

might have offered him. And of course, as a female, she held an inferior position. Men were not supposed to talk to women who were not members of their family. She should have been beneath his notice.

But he does notice her. And he speaks with her. And he engages her in one of the most theologically deep conversations recorded about Jesus. And he reveals to this Samaritan woman of questionable circumstances something he has told no one else before--who he is, that he is the Messiah. And as they sit there talking at this well, this place of water, Jesus tells her he can give her living water, a kind of water that will satisfy her deepest thirsts. And notice what the woman does. She gets up, leaves behind her empty water jug, goes back to her village and begins to tell them with great enthusiasm all about Jesus. Her parched soul has been filled with renewed life, renewed vitality.

What do you think happened there at that well? What did this Samaritan woman receive from Jesus that so changed her?

Validation. That she, a woman, a Samaritan, a person with a difficult history, was worthy and valuable. She was treated with respect and dignity. In other words, she received love.

In that moment there at the well, there in the person of Jesus, she experienced God coming close. She had a close encounter with God. God came close to her, yes, even to *her*, and touched her life. And that close encounter with God and that validation of love became living water for her parched life.

One of the things I like about this story is where this woman has her close encounter with God. She is just going about doing one of the most ordinary and mundane activities of her day. She's not sitting in the temple in prayer. She's not up on a holy mountain for a special spiritual retreat. She is just going about her daily life, when suddenly she meets God, and she allows

herself to enter that moment. And in doing so, she finds herself restored by the water God can give.

That's where God meets us. Out there, in our daily lives. Standing in line at the grocery store. Pumping gas. Talking with a colleague. Helping our kids with homework. Shoveling the sidewalk. I wonder how many close encounters with God we may miss because they come to us in ordinary wrappings--ordinary people, ordinary activities, ordinary moments. If we could do what the Samaritan woman does and allow ourselves into that moment, then maybe we would also find the water that will revive our parched souls. Maybe our prayer for ourselves should be for the removal of all those things that stand in the way of our noticing when God is near: our busy schedules, our grumbling spirits, our opinions, our prejudices. Such things block us from seeing or noticing a moment of God drawing close, of God sustaining us with some moment of grace or beauty.

We need God's life-giving water for we are dehydrated in lots of ways. But all too often we run about trying to manufacture our own wellbeing. Every once in a while I will catch these health gurus on TV promoting some kind of system that will improve our lives. They stand on a stage in front of an audience and talk us through their system for better eating, or exercise, or to improve our marriages. They promise to restore our lives with greater vitality and happiness if we just follow their system, and of course, buy their book. The message is that an improved life, lies within our grasp. We can make it happen. But can we?

Of course, we should eat well, exercise, work on our relationships. These are indeed important in life. But can these things alone renew us? Can they rehydrate our parched souls? We can drink all the vitamin infused bottled waters we like, we can build careers and raise families, we can exercise and eat right, and still find ourselves dried up.

Jesus tells the woman standing at that well, "Everyone who drinks of *this* water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

What is the water that Jesus gives? What is this life-giving water? Certainly it involves the love, and acceptance, and grace, and compassion that Jesus offers this woman at the well. That is life-giving for each of us, when we know it and feel it. And it is life-giving when we offer this to others. There is so much withholding going on in this world: withholding of compassion, withholding of acceptance, withholding of forgiveness, withholding of generosity, withholding of help. Jesus is generous with what he offers to us. And his generosity is the building blocks of life. So, yes, the generosity Jesus gives with his love, his acceptance, his forgiveness becomes living water to our souls.

But I also think that living water we receive from God lies in the simple but profound fact that God comes close to us. There is something about having a close encounter with God that is transformative. The woman at the well was renewed by her close encounter with God. Suddenly her little life was touched by the Sacred One. God's sacred presence came to her. And she was renewed by it.

God's sacred presence comes to you. And to me. Each and every day, God draws close. In our ordinary moments, among ordinary people, God is touching our lives with meaning and love and grace. There is nothing routine or mundane about your life. For God is in it. God has touched it. God has blessed it. That sacred presence, that sacred love, is the living water that flows into and restores our dried up souls. Great God, give us this water always, so that we may never be thirsty again!