

## “LIVING WATER FOR THIRSTY SOULS”

The Reverend Jim Dennis, Jr. 02/27/05

I heard a speaker say, 20 years ago people were asking, “How can I get into Heaven?” And today, more people are asking, “How can I get through this day?” Without God’s living water, we get parched. We get dehydrated in our souls. In my mission travels, drinking water has often been a concern. To calm our fears, one restaurant in Cape Town, South Africa had a sign posted in big, bold letters, and it said, and it was supposed to be reassuring, “The manager has personally passed all the water served here.” Not what I wanted to hear.

I’ve been in situations where water was scarce, very scarce, and what we could get was not always safe. Off the coast of Honduras, in St. Eustacias Island, I worked and preached for two weeks, and the only water we had came from stagnant cisterns that was collected from rain off lead painted roofs of houses. There wasn’t a well anywhere on the island. Brushing my teeth one morning, out popped a little wriggling something onto my toothbrush. Later on, they told me that shouldn’t happen, the fish in the cistern are supposed to keep down the insects, and I wondered, well, what keeps down the fish waste? I yearned for some cool, flowing water.

I’ve traveled throughout the world, and I’ve always run across, in unexpected places, living water references. Do you know Salkahatchie, our home repair mission, it comes from a native American word, which translates roughly, “living water.” Many of you didn’t know that. In my first trip to Africa, we stayed in a town named, in

the Zulu language, Amanzariti, which translates, you guessed it, “living water.” And on that trip one day, I remember we were served food on site, and there was no running water, just some stagnant water in 50 gallon drums to wash our hands, and visions of parasites danced in my head, and I’m probably the only one who thought that, and I’m the only one who got sick!

Three days later, very, very dehydrated and very dizzy and very sick, I felt like a joke that comedian Steven Wright said once. I remember, someone asked him once, “How do you feel?” and he said, “You know how you feel when you lean back in a chair and almost fall over, and then you just catch yourself at the last minute?” And the guy said, “Yeah.” And Steven Wright said, “I feel like that all the time.” Some people do feel like that all the time. If your body doesn’t get what it needs, you get dizzy. You get disoriented or worse, and I wonder, does the same apply to our hearts, and our souls. I think so.

Scripture is filled with water and thirst references, physical and spiritual. Wandering in the desert, Moses had a crisis because there was no water for the people, and here in John, Jesus said, “Those who drink of the living water I give them will never thirst again. It will gush up within them to eternal life.” That’s a spiritual sort of feeding, water and thirsting. And in Isaiah also, it says, “Here, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and he who has no money, come and buy and eat. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and labor for that which does not satisfy?” God is offering himself as what we truly hunger and thirst for. In Jeremiah, the prophet, God laments that

“my people have forsaken me, the fount of living waters and instead hewn out cisterns, broken cisterns, other belief systems, other gods that can hold no water.” An in the last book of the Bible, there comes this great invitation from Revelation 22:17,

“Come and let him who is thirsty, come let him who desires, take the water of life without price.”

Now back to Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. You have to understand the division between Jew and Samaritan. It says just in one brief snippet of a verse that they had no dealings with each other. It’s much stronger than that. Imagine, to help us understand, that they were North and South in the Civil War, each claiming a righteous cause and a separate capitol. Imagine they were conservative Christians and followers of Reverend Sun Yung Moon. There is no middle ground.

Imagine that they were people who traced their pure ancestry back to the Mayflower and people who mixed and mingled without benefit of marriage, and couldn’t trace their bloodline two generations. These were the differences that were thought to be so insurmountable in that day. He was a scholar, a rabbi. She, no particular training, and worse yet, worse yet, and this is the only part some of you will remember from my sermon, worse yet, here was Jesus, a Carolina fan, standing at a Clemson water fountain, asking her to get him a drink. No wonder she was surprised.

Samaritans discounted the Hebrew Bible beyond the first five books. They

discounted Jerusalem as the proper temple site, and they built their own temple on a mount in Samaria, and rumor had it that they were all, the Samaritans were morally lax, theologically and personally, and ostensibly this was mirrored in this woman’s life. And the disciples were amazed that Jesus would even talk to her, much less consider drinking water touched by her hands. She was considered impure and unclean, untouchable, but Jesus did not see it their way, and Jesus does not see it our way.

Somehow or another, Jesus saw value and worth in this woman that others called outcast. Jesus saw her as one beloved of God. Jesus took time to explain that true worship doesn’t depend on what mountain or what temple or what version of the Bible. He took the time to tell her that true worship comes from inside. God is spirit, and they that worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth. She was a failure at relationships, and Jesus offered a relationship with God. A relationship with God to quench her parched soul, but how could Jesus offer God’s love to a woman that everybody else knew was worthless.

I’ll tell you a story to illustrate that, I hope. A woman was sitting on a porch one summer evening somewhere down South, discussing family with her grandmother, both of them rocking back and forth, a lazy conversation, and in the course of the conversation, she said, “He’s just no good,” about one of their kin, “He’s just no good. He’s completely unreliable. He’s one of the laziest people I know,” but the grandmother stood up, and said, “Yes, he’s a bad one all right, but Jesus loves

him.” The younger woman said, “I’m not so sure of that.” The older woman said, “Oh yes, Jesus loves him,” and the younger woman rocked and thought for a moment, and said, “Well, Jesus don’t know him like we do.”

You see, the disciples thought, well, Jesus just doesn’t know about Samaritans. They started to question him, but then they held back. Of course, he knew them much better than the shocked disciples for he saw them, the Samaritans, as children in need of God’s grace just like all of us. God is no respecter of persons. Jesus obviously doesn’t make the distinctions we do, and it’s funny that the Samaritan woman even reminded Jesus of the rules, and said, “Hey, folks like you aren’t supposed to talk to folks like me.” She’d been put down so long that she actually reminded Jesus that he was supposed to put her down, too. You’re being nice to me, what’s up? You’re supposed to raise your eyebrow in disgust, and look down your nose, then hiss and jeer and circle wide. You’re a Jew and I’m a Samaritan. Don’t you know the rules?

The disciples, ah, they knew the rules. It says in verse 27, “Just then the disciples came, and they marveled that he was talking with a Samaritan woman, but none said, “What do you wish?” or “Why are you talking with her?”, but they thought it, oh, but they thought it. The disciples wanted to ask, “What are you doing? We have nothing to do with people like that.” How could Jesus give her, because he did, God’s Word to spread to her people? How could he link his reputation to the likes of her? What was he thinking? You know, Jesus may have been the first person in a long time

to pay positive attention to this outcast among outcasts because that’s what Jesus came to do. And there is no one who is not redeemable. To believe that insults the cross of Christ.

Jesus knows our need, and Jesus offers his love and grace the same to any and all who will take it. We make distinction. Even the disciples do. Distinctions that God ignores. We often think, “Those people are impure,” and I believe that God laughs, “You all are. Don’t you get it? And I love you anyway.” God is bigger, and God’s love is bigger than we think. Turn this thing around a little, and you’ll see something new. We are all outcasts. You are an outcast, and I am an outcast. We do the casting by our sin and by our selfishness. By living for things that can never quench the thirst we have for God, we cast ourselves away. Only the sacrifice of God in Christ gives us a way back into His care.

No one is good enough by birth or by race or even religious preference by itself. You have to know your need for a savior, and that God provided one in Jesus Christ, to be able to worship as Jesus said here, in spirit and in truth, and God provided all that we need.

Think of the encounter. The Samaritan woman and Jesus. She was noticed, not ignored. She was talked to, not talked down to. Her problems were named, not ignored, and her beliefs were corrected. The differences were not ignored or diminished. She was offered God’s grace and a job spreading the good news. We are all invited to receive the love and the forgiveness of the Gospel. She was used, not merely tolerated, but used of God, and at the end of the encounter, the

outcast woman went and spread the news that the Messiah had come. Imagine, unclean, bad theology, living in sin, five time loser at marriage, now an evangelist. She spread the good news. A hungry person telling others where to get food. A thirsty person telling others where to get water. And they listened to her, and they came and they saw Jesus, and they believed. The woman at the well, an evangelist, how about that? Jesus can use imperfect people to offer God's love and grace and upbuilding hope to the world.

Do you doubt that God can use the likes of you and me? There is a United Methodist pastor in Houston. He tells of an encounter that happened at a homeless shelter. After a soup kitchen meal, they had Communion once a month, and one day the minister, named Tom, was serving Communion, and he came to a man who was kneeling and praying fervently, but when he began to serve him Communion, the scruffy man looked up, and said, "Skip me," and Tom said, "What?" And the man said, "Skip me. I'm not worthy." And Tom said, "Neither am I," and Tom added, "I tell you what, I'm going to serve Communion to all these other people, and then I'm coming back, and serve Communion to you, and then I would like you to serve Communion to me." The man blinked, and said to Tom, "Preacher, is that legal?" Tom said, "Yes, it's legal, and it's beautiful, and that is what we're going to do." And Tom went down the altar as he said, and he served everybody else, and he came back to the reluctant man, and he said, "What is your name?" The man said, "Josh." And Tom placed the elements, the bread and the wine before him, and said, "Josh, here is the body of Christ,

here is the blood of Christ given for you, eat and drink in remembrance that Christ came for you, Christ died for you, for the forgiveness of your sin." Josh blinked back the tears in his eyes, and he received, and then Tom knelt, and handed Josh the tray of bread and wine, and said, "Now, you serve me." And Josh nervously took the tray, and he looked over both shoulders, and he said, "Preacher, are you sure this is legal?" And he said, "Yes, it's legal. Just do it." He looked around as if the church police were going to arrest him, and finally, he came and he muttered, "Body, blood for you, hang in there."

It was a holy moment, and Josh, like the Samaritan woman, became holy because when given the choice and given the chance and given the opportunity to serve God, they said yes. Holy means being used of God. God is seeking us, calling us. God has work for us to do. And God already knows the things we use as reasons for holding back and not drinking deeply of his presence. God is the one still point of the chaos of this world, and if we're not focused on God, we begin to believe that chaos is all there is, and we get dizzy. We get dizzy in our souls.

We were made for God and for each other, and if we do not have a relationship with God that sends us out with compassion to others, then we are running on empty. Spiritual hunger and thirst will overtake us.

Last story, I realize I'm over time. A former church member, well, two former church members and I were out riding our bicycles, and it was in the summer in July, and it was about 98 plus degrees, and I know that was a questionable thing

to do, in the hills up and down above Spartanburg, near Campobella, and we met a lady, probably in her 90s, walking down a steep hill in that 98 plus degree temperature, in the middle of the road, wearing a housecoat and slippers, and there were heat vapors swirling in the air off the pavement. She had Alzheimers, and she had slipped away from a nursing home. She said she was walking home. We asked her where home was. She said Pickens, about 60 miles away. She also said, "I'm thirsty." We called the facility, and they came to get her, but two things impressed me. Even in the confusion in her brain, she remembered two things, home and "I thirst." That's what she wanted. Drink deeply of all that God has to offer. Come home all the way, home with God, and God will give you a spirit to love others to dwell within you. Let me end where I began, 20 years ago, people were asking, "How can I get into Heaven?" Today people are asking, "How can I get through this day?" God is the answer to both questions. God's spirit welling up within. It could be that there are some thirsting to death right here in this sanctuary today. Parched and dry, sapped of strength and running on empty, maybe you are the one, maybe you are the one who sees that and knows, then that means you are the one to be God's messenger to offer hope and health and healing.

No one should ever drown in a party of lifeguards. And no one should ever dry up and die inside among a body of believers, but it happens, and it's wrong. We have the living water of the Gospel. Some folks are dry to the bone. Be God's messenger. Be God's living water bearer of hope just as the Samaritan woman was, just like the

unnamed evangelist Samaritan woman at the well. Be God's messenger of hope. God can certainly use us. Amen.