

## We Thirst

March 19, 2017

John 4:1-42

I was tempted to re-use the sermon I preached here 3 years ago, because it still seemed to be so relevant to what is going on in the world. In that sermon, I talked about how Jesus crossed many boundaries and borders in his interaction with the Samaritan woman.

We live, still, in a world that is deeply divided along lines of race, gender, class, theology, politics and nationality. And these divisions have gotten more pronounced; intolerance of difference has increased; more people are emboldened to speak aloud things they never would have said in another time.

We need Jesus' boundary-breaking, border crossing presence in our world today more than ever.

But scripture doesn't just have 1 application; there are more sermons to preach from the same text than just 1. If scripture is truly life-giving and relevant for each day, each year, each era we find ourselves in, then boundary crossing isn't the only meaning in this text, even if it is a compelling and still-relevant one.

A few weeks ago, I attended part of the theological lecture series at AMBS. Hans de Wit, the speaker, is a Dutch theologian who headed up a project on intercultural reading of the Bible that used this story of the Samaritan woman at the well as the basis for the study. In the project, Bible study groups around the world read and studied this text in their own context; then they submitted a report that went to another Bible study group in another part of the world. These groups then read the report of the other group in a different context, and responded to that report. Those reflections on the report went back to the original group. Hans de Wit shared his learnings about intercultural reading of the Bible during his lectures at AMBS. The findings and stories of this project can be found in a bound book, *Through the Eyes of Another*, or online. ([http://www.bible4all.org/bestanden/documenten.ashx?document\\_id=118](http://www.bible4all.org/bestanden/documenten.ashx?document_id=118).)

In listening to de Wit's stories about the groups who studied this text, my eyes were opened to multiple interpretations of this story. These were ordinary readers of the Bible, meaning they came from all walks of life, and all parts of

society, representing every profession you can imagine. It was fascinating, and challenging, to hear what they noticed, the questions they asked, and the ways in which this story connected with their lives. They noticed things, and made comments that I never would have noticed. The context in which one lives influences how one reads and interprets the stories in the Bible.

One contextual factor is that many of these readers lived in communities where there was a communal well where they went for water. This changed how they read this story. For those of us who walk to a tap in the kitchen or bathroom to get water, we think of the well as a metaphor. But for those who live in communities where they have to walk to the communal well with their buckets or water jars, the well is an actual place where real people meet.

For those of us for whom “noon” means lunch time, or the mid-point in the work day; or who live in places where there are seasons like fall, winter and spring, we miss the importance of the reference to Jesus being at the well at noon in a context of extreme heat. In tropical places, and desert places, noon is a time when people look for shade or stay in-doors; it is not the time to go to the well—the actual, physical well. When I travelled in Israel/Palestine a number of years ago, we were told many times about the importance of staying hydrated. Dehydration can happen quickly. And the heat of the day increased the need to drink water.

In that dry, hot context, the request for water is a real request, for actual, real water. When we recognize this concrete reality, we then can hear Jesus’ request for a drink with different ears. It is very likely that the request comes from physical thirst. He and his disciples have been walking in a dry, dusty climate, in extreme heat. They haven’t had anything to drink for a long time. They’ve walked many miles, talking together. They come to a well and not only are they hungry, but extremely thirsty. Have you ever been this thirsty for cold, refreshing water?

In our context, we quickly jump to metaphorical water, a metaphorical well; we move immediately to the spiritual interpretation of this story, which isn’t wrong, but never gets us in touch with real, physical thirst. Those in contexts where physical needs, like water, are more apparent, engage this story first at the real, concrete level.

Groups reading this text, from countries like the Netherlands, South Africa, and Brazil, observed that for a hot, dry country like Palestine, water would be an essential condition for life itself; that water must have been one of the best drinks in such a dry area; water cannot be denied to anybody, not even to an enemy or a stranger. One group noted that Jesus had to ask for the water; it wasn't offered to him, and the same group noted that Jesus never said thank you. Several groups wondered if Jesus was ever given a drink of water. (p. 379)

These observations, thoughts and questions about this story get me in touch with my own thirst. As I studied this text, and pondered thirst, I realized that I rarely leave home without a water bottle, even if I'm just running a short errand. That's interesting. And if I do leave home without a water bottle, I immediately feel thirsty, because I don't have access to a drink of water! I've pondered fasting from food at various points in my life, but the thought of being hungry keeps me from doing it. What is that about? Am I afraid of my own hunger and thirst?

We live in a place where we have an abundance of food and water at our disposal. And we live with messages that entice us always to feed our hunger and quench our thirst. These messages are about real food and drink. How many commercials, advertisements, billboards do we see every day that tell about food or drink that will satisfy us, make us healthier, give us energy, make us better people and better parents? We don't want to be physically hungry or thirsty; we want to be healthy; we want to be better people, and we for sure want the best for our children.

What would happen if we didn't immediately jump to satisfy our physical need, and instead allowed our physical need to help us get in touch with a deeper spiritual need? How might our physical hunger and thirst help us identify our deeper hunger and thirst? What would happen if we paid attention to our thirst, to that which is deeper than physical thirst? That is, after all, one of the purposes of fasting—helping us to identify our hunger and thirst for God.

We don't have communal wells where we go daily to draw water. We are privileged enough that we have only to turn on a tap to satisfy our physical thirst. But we have metaphorical communal wells, places where people go today with their physical needs. Some of these physical needs are masking deeper spiritual needs. Think about the mall; I have rarely been to any mall that is deserted or

empty. At the mall, you can find people from all walks of life, buying stuff to meet a physical need; buying stuff that they don't need. Shopping is a distraction, a momentary feeling of comfort, a momentary relief from stress. But it will not ultimately satisfy. I have a friend who talks about "earring therapy"—buying a new pair of earrings when she is feeling stressed or needs a bit of a pick-me-up. She recognizes the power of material things to meet a momentary need, but also recognizes that it won't satisfy in the long run, which is why she can call it 'earring therapy' with a twinkle in her eye.

Some of the Bible study groups identified the bar as the modern day well where people gather. A group of male inmates talked about the desire for drugs to quench their thirst, or going to their girlfriend's house as their modern day well.

These wells don't necessarily have to be places where bad things happen. After all, the well where Jesus and the woman met provided real water that was important for life. However, we can also get distracted by these places, or think that is enough for us. Jesus is inviting us to go deeper than our physical needs; to recognize in our physical thirst a thirst for something more, something spiritual, that will sustain our souls. Jesus offers life and love, freely and generously.

What is your thirst? How does your physical thirst point you in the direction of a deeper thirst? Can you picture Jesus meeting you at the place of your deepest thirst, asking you to 'give him a drink'? Does his invitation, his request, his own vulnerability and thirst, help you to recognize your need, your thirst, so that you can reply, "Give me a drink, so I will never be thirsty again?"

Everyone is invited to come forward for a drink of water, following the song, "O let all who thirst". Come and drink from the living Water. Come and draw freely from the well of our Lord, which will never run dry.