

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from February 24, 2008

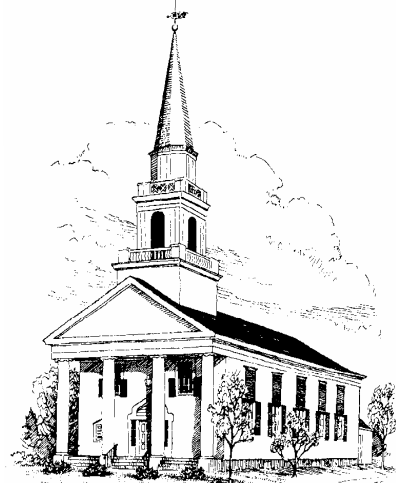
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

“Living Water for All”

Scriptures:

Exodus 17:1-17

John 4:5-29



I remember that day at Jacob’s well as if it were yesterday. It started off like any other day in my hometown of Sychar. At noontime I went out to the ancient well to draw up water and bring it back for my household. It was a daily chore and I had to do it whether I wanted to or not. I always went to the well in the middle of the day. It was the time of day when I did not expect to find anyone else there. That was one of the reasons I went in the middle of the day. Yes, I knew that it was the hottest time of day to go and I knew few others would be there.

Women like me, well, we just didn’t go to the well when the other women in town went. The rest of the town’s women went early in the morning at the start of the day when the sun was just newly up and it was a bit cooler. If you got to the well when there were others there, you could talk and share stories and catch up on the gossip. I simply stayed away from the well at daybreak—too many questions, too many sneers behind my back. A few of us women were considered “less than perfect” in the way our lives had unfolded. I knew what the town women said behind my back. I had been married many more times than most of the other women and some of them thought I was trash. So I simply avoided meeting them at the well by going in the middle of the day.

Those outside of Samaria spurned us, too. We were Jews who had intermarried during the exile. When the other “more pure” Jews returned to rebuild Jerusalem, we were thought to be less than others. The reasons we choose to hate each other are so strange sometimes. These sorts of things had been going on a long time. I don’t know why.

The man from Galilee was just sitting there on a rock under the tree when I arrived at the well that day. As usual I had walked out to the well with my water jar and my bucket. I was glad for the silence and the quiet of the midday. I was a social outcast. I knew it. There was nothing to be done about it. I knew that the other women in my town talked about me and gossiped about my past. I knew that they loved to laugh at my reputation and make jokes about all the husbands I’d had.

When I arrived that day, there was the man from Galilee sitting there all alone. I had passed some of his friends on their way into town. I knew they had been traveling and I guessed that they were going into town to get lunch. When I approached the well, he looked up at me and asked for a drink of water.

It was unusual for any man to look directly at any woman in public. Tradition said that we women were not to be seen or heard. So it startled me a bit not only when he looked directly at me but also that he spoke to me!

As a woman who walked alone much of the time, I was pretty cautious. Women usually walked two by two or in groups—for protection and security, you know, and to avoid having any questions asked by their husbands or any suspicion of any inappropriate conversations with men outside of the family. My life and my reputation had meant I'd had to learn how to forge my own way. I was careful. I didn't go to places where I felt threatened or unsafe. Jesus did not seem to me to be a threat of any kind.

I remember how terribly hot it was that day. The sun was really beating down and I was thirsty too! Now I could have just handed him the bucket and let him haul it up himself but women were expected to draw water and offer it to men.

I just couldn't stop myself from asking, "How is it that you, a stranger and a good Jewish man, ask me, a woman of Samaria, for a drink?" He straight away answered me so strangely, something like, "If you only knew who I really was, you would have asked me for living water!"

Well, I didn't know who he was and I sure didn't know what he was talking about! I looked around wondering if there had been a miracle overnight or something. I glanced around for the appearance of a new spring or something to explain his strange remark. I was confused by that term "living water" he used. We usually referred to running water, like a brook or a spring, as "living water"—you know, water with "life" in it. That was different from standing or stagnant water. I couldn't figure out what he was talking about at first.

As I set down my water jar and got out my bucket to put down into the well, I saw that this stranger didn't even have anything to haul water up from the well with. I said (trying to joke with him), "You don't even have a bucket and this well is very deep! Where do you expect to get that living water? Who do you think you are? Are you greater even than Jacob, our ancestor, who gave us this well?" Then Jesus told me ever-so-calmly and directly that the kind of "living water" he was talking about was different than regular water from any well. The kind of "living water" he was talking about would become in us a spring of "living water" that would gush up to eternal life!

Well, at that I thought that maybe Jesus had had too much time in the sun! After all, there he was just sitting there in the noonday heat. But right away it was clear that this man was serious and he was talking to me! So I said to him, "Give me some of that water, that water that will mean I'm never thirsty again nor have to ever come out here to this well every day to draw it!"

And then Jesus suddenly said the strangest thing to me. He said, "Go, call your husband, and come back!" I said straight away, "I have no husband!" He said, "You are right! You have no husband and you have already had five husbands. And the one you have now is not your own husband!"

Well, I was shocked speechless. How could this man know so much about my life? How could he know that I had been married five times? How could he know that the man I now saw regularly was not my husband at all? The only thing I could say was, "You must be a prophet!"

I gave him a drink of water and he proceeded to tell me all about this "living water". I listened and listened and suddenly I got it! I realized he was offering me, a nobody, the chance for God-given "living water" in my life. Like my offering him a simple drink of water on a hot day for physical thirst, Jesus was offering me "living water" for my spiritual thirst.

People asked me later how did I know who he was? I don't know how I knew. But Jesus just seemed to know that I was thirsty for new meaning in my life. He knew that my life had gotten all jum-

bled up, confused, and “dried out”. He knew that I was in desperate need of spiritual food and spiritual drink.

There was something about how hot and bright the sun was that day. I remember that it seemed like each little wrinkle in my life, every failure, all my regrets, all my wanderings and the losses I’d known, all the broken places in my heart and my life came clear that day in the bright sunshine. I couldn’t hide anything from Jesus in the noonday sun. Jesus knew who I really was. Jesus could see right through into my soul. He knew me better than I even knew myself.

I still remember how everything felt different after that conversation with Jesus at the well. I can admit now that I had gone through many times of spiritual wilderness. Sometimes those seasons had lasted just a few days, and sometimes they had lasted many months and maybe even years. My life had not been easy. I knew what it was to burn with thirst. My life had been parched for a long time before I met Jesus. On that day, I suddenly knew and believed that there was “living water” available for me!

Do you suppose it was like that for the ancestors of the Israelites when they travelled in the wilderness on their long journey to the promised land? Do you suppose they understood when Moses took his stick and hit the rock and water came out? Sometimes it takes a miracle to us to believe and trust in God. Maybe we all have to get in touch with our thirst before we can really trust God.

I realized that day at the well that I had been thirsty for “living water” for a long time. Yes, there had been the occasional pat on the back or a surprising word from one of the women in town. Sometimes I had found solace in a precious moment of quiet solitude, or peace from a verse of scripture, or comfort from the sound of a melody floating by, maybe the song of a bird at early morning or the beauty of a sunset. But those moments had been like tiny sips of water. They had kept me barely alive and I had been really thirsty for a long time.

What Jesus offered me that day was an abundance of eternal “living”, “living water” so plentiful that I could trust that I would do more than simply survive after that day. After that day, I could really thrive. Once I did start to understand what Jesus was talking about and offering me, I was so moved I just had to share it with others. If this God was a spirit who cared about me, a mere woman of Samaria and a woman with the kind of history I had, then maybe this God had something to offer all of the townspeople whose lives were also difficult and thirsty.

What Jesus offered me that day was different from anything else I had ever known. I just had to tell others because the news was too wonderful to keep just for myself. I ran into town. I even left my water jar behind that day in my hurry to tell the others. I suddenly felt that my old life was gone and that I had a new purpose and a new journey to travel.

I ran into town to tell others about what I had seen and heard. I didn’t have the right words at first. I tried to tell them that there was a prophet out at the well, a prophet who knew everything I had ever done. Others went out to talk with Jesus then. They had to see for themselves, of course. They invited Jesus to stay in town for a few days. They all saw for themselves that Jesus was someone special.

Many of us came to believe that Jesus really was the Messiah we had waited so long for. Have you heard about this man Jesus? He offered me “living water!” He offers “living water to us all!”

