

October
Sermon for Sunday, September 31, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"JESUS AND THE UNLIKELY PROSPECT"
St. John 4:1-26

Text: "...but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."
--St. John 4:14

All of the commentaries agree that the fourth chapter of St. John is amazingly accurate. It is accurate in geographical detail, it is accurate in its reflection of custom and tradition, it is accurate in its reflection of the religious feeling between Jew and Samaritan. One gets the feeling that the disciple John must have stayed behind with Jesus when the other disciples went into town to buy food, for we are obviously listening to an eye-witness account to an event in the life of Jesus.

Let me begin by making some general comments about several things in this passage of scripture that catch our attention. In verse six we read, "and so Jesus, wearied as he was with his journey, sat down beside the well. It was about the sixth hour." Now, the sixth hour means it was high noon, in the very heat of the day. Jesus and his disciples had been walking probably since early morning and the heat had begun to take its toll. Now they were all tired, thirsty, hot and hungry. So the Bible says that Jesus was wearied. I want you to know that the idea of Jesus being hot and tired touches my heart. Sometimes we tend to think of Jesus as some mighty conquerer who is really just God in disguise in human form, who knows nothing of human problems and human troubles and human needs. Such a figure as that could never understand your problems and my needs. So it catches our attention when it says that Jesus was tired. This is no remote God pretending to share our lives, but rather here is one who is entering into all of our experiences. I see so many people who are tired, who are just worn out with life and who are terribly weary. I talked to a young college girl recently and as she poured out her heart to me she said with tears trembling in her eyes, "I am just so tired I wish I could die." She was not only physically drained, she was emotionally drained and spiritually weary. A Jesus who himself is tired and weary is one we can identify with. He is one we feel we can understand our own heartaches and tears. A person who has never lost a loved one cannot truly comfort somebody who is experiencing the tragedy and the hurt of a grief. A person who has never had his friends desert him cannot imagine what it is like to stand alone without the comfort and the love of others. A person who has never been hungry, who has never done without, who has never been pinched with sheer necessity, can know how it is to be poor and poverty-stricken. But Jesus knows. He knows what it is to grieve, he knows what it is to weep, he knows what it is to be poor and not even have a place to lay his head. He knows what it is like to be deserted and to stand alone. He knows what it's like to suffer and to bear dreadful pain. He knows what it is to be tempted to the limits of human endurance. He even knows what it's like to be weary and tired. I can identify with that kind of a Jesus because he has been there. He can understand my grief, my temptation, my needs, my weariness, and he can show me how to stand fast where he himself has stood. So the Bible says that Jesus was weary. Maybe it is a very small thing but somehow it seems terribly important to me because here is a man I can identify with, who will understand me and my human needs. Jesus has a right to speak to your needs in whatever hurt you are experiencing because he has shared them.

The next thing that catches our attention is the request of Jesus when he said to the woman at the well, "Give me a drink." I want you to notice who he made this request of. First of all, she was a Samaritan whom the Jews considered to be

second-class people. Secondly, she was a woman and women in those days were of inferior status. Thirdly, she was immoral. She was already married to her fifth husband and apparently was living with a man to whom she was not even married. And fourthly, she was either unorganized or unpopular. Why was she at the well at noon? Most of the women had come the evening before when it was cool to draw their water and to share their gossip with one another. So either her whole life was unorganized and she was hours late, a befuddled creature running far behind schedule, coming to draw water at noon, or else her bad reputation had made her so unpopular that she was unwilling to come to the well when the other women were there, for she knew she would be ostracized. Now, that is the sort of woman that Jesus encountered and that is the sort of a woman he asked a drink from. That he would ask this sort of woman for a drink catches our attention. Jesus is not only one who gives, he also asks. He invites our assistance. You know, giving a drink of water to a thirsty stranger is certainly no big deal, and yet it is significant enough that Jesus tells us that giving a drink of water to a stranger is going to pass muster at the throne of God on judgment day! Most of us are waiting for the big, important things to do for Jesus. Most of us are waiting to make some big splash, to do something perhaps of historical significance for Jesus, and we can't be bothered with the little things. Yet, you know, it is the little things, the little deeds of kindness, mercy, compassion and thoughtfulness, are the ones that will pass muster at the judgment day. Jesus will ask us what we did for the down-and-out, for the needy, for the lonely, for the disheartened, for the poor, for the widowed. "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren... you have done it unto me." (Matt. 25:40) Yes, says Jesus, "I accept these little deeds gratefully from you as a personal kindness to me."

And who can give a cup of cold water to Jesus and make him less tired, less weary? Why, the woman of Samaria! Oh, that warms my heart! There must be great and holy saints to do great deeds, to write great books, to make great witnesses, to live great lives. But there is a place for people like me. There is a place for ordinary or less than ordinary people. There is a place for a poor, inadequate sinner whom Jesus invited to minister to him. I can have a share in his ministry, too. I can be a part of what he is doing in the world and so can you. There is a place for all of us, however we are, however great and however small, however holy and however sinful, there is a place for all of us to serve the Lord. Praise God for that!

Then in our scripture we find this sentence, "For his disciples had gone away into the city." Now, that catches our attention, too. These disciples had among their company one who at the wedding in Canaan of Galilee had turned water into wine. They had among their company one who had fed the multitudes with a few fish and a couple loaves of bread. They had in their midst one who had told them to let down their nets in a place where they had fished all night and caught nothing, but now they brought their nets up bursting with a mass of fish. Why now this sudden necessity to go away into the city to buy food? Why now if they were hungry must they seek food and pay for it in the usual way? As I read this, "For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food" I suddenly realized that Jesus never, never does any unnecessary miracles. Jesus will not do for us what a little pain and effort on our part will enable us to do for ourselves. One night some of us were praying and someone said to us, "Pray for me that God would make me completely holy." I want to tell you that I can't pray a prayer like that. He was asking God to let him bypass struggle and responsibility for himself, to do for him what he needs and must do for himself. No, God will not miraculously and suddenly, without effort on our part, make us pure and holy. That's a road we can and ought to walk down step by step.

No, there are no unnecessary miracles. While Jesus will support me and help me and encourage me, he will not do for me what I ought to do for myself.

The Samaritan women wanted to know why Jesus, a Jew, would ask a drink of a Samaritan. Jesus replied, "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." Yes, "if you knew..." That phrase catches our attention because it is filled with pathos and tragedy. Jesus looks at this pitiful creature before him--surely she must have thought she was a real mankiller, that she was living a gay, exciting life, that she was having a grand and glorious time, a colorful life. But Jesus said to her, "If you knew..." and how much sorrow and tragedy lies in that little phrase! There are so many people today who do not know, who go blundering blindly into foolishness, who are lost, who are like sheep who have gone astray. Oh, if they only knew! If only they knew that the best the world has to offer will never satisfy. If only they knew they are being tricked and duped into wasting their lives for things that will never last, never endure and never satisfy. If only they knew that their way will, like the way of the prodigal son, end in some spiritual pig pen, end in the mud of life with an inner spiritual hunger gnawing at them and a loneliness that will make them envy the very pigs! Oh, if they only knew! If they only knew how wonderful life in Jesus is. It is not soft or thin-blooded or contemptible, but it is filled with glory.

This past week we were in Rome, Georgia. Something we don't ordinarily do that early in a lay-renewal, but I felt led by the Holy Spirit to give an altar call. I told them, "We're going to do it in a very Presbyterian way. We Presbyterians don't like emotion, so we're not going to sing 'Just As I Am', we are not going to sing anything. But in a very rational, reasonable, unemotional way, we are going to do business with God. If you mean business, if your heart is empty, I want you to come." And the people began to come. One thing that amazed us was the little children who came. I didn't understand it at first because I certainly had not been preaching a sermon directed to children, but the children came, with tears streaming down their faces, to give their hearts to Jesus. Later on I found out what God was doing. He was using those children to reach out and touch the hearts of their mothers and their daddys. We had a man come who was the most influential man in the community and he said, "I want to be sure about my relationship to Jesus, and I want this whole town to know what Jesus has done for me." We had a young man come, and they told me he was the most influential leaders among the young adults. He came and asked his wife to come and they turned and said to their friends, "We are taking a stand for Jesus Christ. We want to invite you to come and stand with us." Yes, if you only knew. They had discovered the emptiness of life and were making a commitment to something that would endure, to something that is truly worthwhile.

And then our text for this morning catches our attention. Jesus says, "But whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." I find people weary of trying to make life interesting. Many of us have so much that things no longer seem to matter and life begins to get jaded and dull. People are bored and always looking for something new or exciting to do. But a Christian doesn't have that problem. There is no such thing as growing tired of Jesus. There is no fuller satisfaction to be found anywhere than in Jesus. He is a fountain in our hearts, ever flowing, ever fresh, ever pure, ever cool to our souls. There is nothing more exciting in all the world than to belong to Jesus, to have those rivers of living water flowing in our lives! How thrilling it was last week at the last day of the lay renewal when I gave an invitation, "All those who have made a commitment to Jesus, I want you to come." And here they came, 100, 200.

And then I said I wanted all those who have made a commitment to Jesus or a recommitment this week, to come. The pews were practically emptied because people had found that the most exciting thing in the world is to have a personal relationship to Jesus Christ.

You know, Jesus reveals himself to the most unlikely people. The woman at the well was an unlikely person, an unlikely prospect. Yet, when out of the desperate longing of her heart she said, "I know the Messiah--the Savior--is coming someday..." Jesus revealed himself to her and said "I am he..." You may feel you are an unlikely prospect. There was once a featherbrained young man who was playing the town fool and apparently going straight to the devil. He was an unlikely prospect. But Jesus said to him, "I am he..." And in the soul of that young man there began to flow rivers of living water. We know that young man today as St. Francis of Assisi. Or look again at a captain of a slave ship. Surely an unlikely prospect, dealing in human flesh, trading in human misery, the captain of a ship so defiled by the odor of humanity that other ships gave it a wide berth on the ocean. Yes, an unlikely prospect. Yet, to that despicable sailor in the midst of a storm one night, Jesus said to him, "I am he..." and the fountains of living water began to flow in his soul. His name was John Newton and while you may not recognize his name, you will surely recognize some of the great hymns he wrote. For example, one night as the storm broke about his ship and he thought all would surely be lost, one of his sailors cried out, "Jesus!" That name, like an arrow, cut through his heart, and out of that experience he wrote "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds." He also wrote "Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken" and "Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound." That's what Jesus did for him.

I suppose when you get down to it, all of us are rather unlikely prospects. None of us are what we ought to be or want to be--most of us wonder what could Jesus see in us. Yet, to each of us Jesus says, "If you only knew..." He says to us, "I am he... I am the Savior." Like the woman at the well, you and I are unlikely prospects. But to us Jesus says, "I am that living water." The woman at the well, the unlikely prospect, said, "Give me that living water, that I may never thirst again." She said, "Fill my cup, Lord..." Jesus did that for her and he'll do that for the most unlikely prospect--even you, if you will ask him.