JESUS TALKS WITH A SAMARITAN WOMAN

John 4:1–26

Key Verses: 4:13,14

“Jesus answered, ‘Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’”

Are you thirsty? What do you really *want*? What are you *longing* for? In John’s Gospel, hunger and thirst symbolize spiritual yearning. As human beings, we’re both body and soul, but we hear our bodies better than we hear our souls. At our core, we’re all longing for something or someone, and, we’re not sure why. In today’s passage Jesus meets such a human being. And he helps her see the source of true satisfaction. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Look at verses 1–3. It says Jesus learned that the Pharisees had taken notice of his growing ministry, and because of this, he left Judea and went back to Galilee. Jesus wasn’t interested in big numbers or impressing people. He was interested in deeper things, in helping individual people. He also knew it wasn’t the right time for his ministry to collide with the Pharisees—he had just started, and there was so much for him to do. So he left all those people who’d come to his disciples to be baptized, entrusting them to God, for now.

Where did he go? Look at verse 4. This one statement is shocking. As we see repeatedly in the passage, Jews and Samaritans did not associate with one another. They wouldn’t even use the same dishes. Who were the Samaritans? They were basically the ten lost tribes of Israel. They used to be called “Northern Israel” when the nation was divided. Due to their idolatry, they were eventually invaded by the Assyrian Empire, and during that time, Jews in Northern Israel were forced to move elsewhere, foreigners were brought to live there, and Jews were forced to marry them. But it wasn’t just about being a mixed race and losing their racial purity. Northern Israel had tried to set up their own place of worship, with their own idols, and refused to go to Jerusalem to worship. This became a bone of contention between Jews and Samaritans. Most Jews, to keep their sense of purity, avoided traveling through Samaria. If they had to travel from Judea to Galilee, or from Galilee to Judea, they’d cross to the east side of the Jordan River, to keep away from Samaria. The route took twice as long, but there was so much hostility between Jews and Samaritans, people did it anyway.

So why did Jesus “have” to go through Samaria? The passage doesn’t say. But it’s likely he sensed it was his Father’s will. Jesus was carefully following his Father’s leading. Jesus came to this world to break down all kinds of barriers and hostilities between people and to reach the people that others avoid. In fact, Jesus came for all the people of the world, regardless of race or religion, or what other people might think of them.

Look at verses 5,6. This town was in a valley between two famous mountains, Mount Ebal and Mount Gerazim. Jesus and his disciples had likely been walking since sunrise, for about six hours. Now it was noon, and at that time of day in that area of the world, it’s very hot. Jesus was tired from the journey, and thirsty, so he sat down by the well. Verse 8 says that his disciples had gone into the town to buy food, so Jesus was alone.

What happened? Look at verse 7. It was strange for a woman to come out of the town to draw water at this well in the heat of the day, all by herself. Most women went in groups in the early morning or in the evening, to avoid the heat and to have a time of fellowship together. But this woman was willing to endure the heat in order to avoid people. Jesus himself was tired and thirsty, but he didn’t just keep to himself. Look at verse 7 again. He struck up a conversation. At first it doesn’t seem so impressive. But Jewish men never spoke in public to women they didn’t know, sort of like in Muslim countries, and they especially wouldn’t speak to a Samaritan woman. By asking this woman for a drink, Jesus was breaking racial, religious and gender barriers. Later, when his disciples return, they’re surprised find him talking to a woman (27).

And his first words to her are noteworthy: “Will you give me a drink?” By saying this, he’s admitting his need, making himself vulnerable, and asking a favor. It shows not only initiative but also humility. After a hostile or broken relationship, so many people refuse to speak first. But Jesus spoke first, and he spoke so humbly. Humanly speaking, he was going way out of his comfort zone. He was taking a risk at being misunderstood and judged. But his humbly asking a favor of her was a life-changing moment in her life. We like to stay around people we’re comfortable with, our family and friends, “our” kind of people. We all need to learn our Lord Jesus’ initiative and humility to go out of our comfort zones if we’re ever going to reach people different than ourselves.

So how does the woman respond to his request? Look at verse 9. She’s shocked, and maybe a little intrigued. She’s also kind of enjoying the moment, refusing to help this thirsty Jewish stranger and reminding him that they’re not even supposed to be talking. For a woman who likely had to live her whole life being bossed around and used by men, it was a sweet moment to say no. How does Jesus reply? Read verse 10. Though she refused to give him a drink, he answers so graciously. He isn’t trying to use her; in fact, he’s offering to give her something very special. To get to that, he first mentions what she doesn’t know. What is it? Jesus says she doesn’t know “the gift of God,” and, who he is.

What’s “the gift of God”? God’s gift is his grace of forgiveness of sins. This woman didn’t know God’s grace, so it never crossed her mind to just ask for it. Without knowing God’s grace, his free gift, she’d given up on herself as too sinful a woman. And who is Jesus whom she didn’t know? The introduction in chapter 1 basically tells us that Jesus is God. So this isn’t just a meeting between a man and a woman; it’s a meeting between the Holy God and a sinful human being. There’s a much greater gap between them that she thinks. Though she can’t see it, God is right there, reaching out to her. Though she’s being so rude and hostile, God himself is speaking to her, trying to make a relationship with her. He says that if she had asked, he would have given her “living water,” something her soul was really longing for.

How does she respond? Not well. Look at verses 11,12. All she can see is that Jesus is empty handed. Despite his big talk, he doesn’t look so impressive. And she quickly compares him to Jacob. Why? As a Samaritan, she’s claiming to be one of Jacob’s descendants. She’s claiming to have some validity based on her historical connection to Jacob, the father of Israel. So, what’s she’s really doing is trying to compensate for her sense of inferiority as a Samaritan before a Jew. Her spiritual eyes are not yet open, so all she can see is physical and human things, despite Jesus’ gracious offer. She’s stuck, and kind of tragic.

Jesus could have been offended that she was comparing him to Jacob and making fun of his offer to her. But what does he say to her? Read verses 13,14. He doesn’t deviate from what he’s offering her. Though he himself is physically thirsty, he knows that *she’s* really thirsty *spiritually*. He could speak like this to her because he sees her with compassion. In these verses Jesus is speaking about spiritual truth in a way that she can understand. She knows very well that the water in this well can’t permanently quench her thirst. So Jesus is suggesting by his words that it represents *other* things in life, all the things that don’t really satisfy us. Whether it’s physical pleasures, money, achievements, or even human love, we always need more and more, and they always leave us thirsty again. Chasing such things for satisfaction is quite tiring, and ultimately they always leave us feeling meaningless.

Read verse 14 again. The living water that Jesus gives is the only thing that really quenches our thirst. He says when we drink it we “never thirst.” We no longer want the things that can’t satisfy us. This living water satisfies our souls. What is this “living water” that Jesus gives? Later in chapter 7 the author explains that it represents the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus gives to those who believe in him. The Holy Spirit’s presence within us quenches our thirsty souls. Why? It’s because he’s God’s own presence. He gives us a living relationship with the living God. When we have the living water, the Holy Spirit, we no longer know “about” God; we actually *know* him *personally*. He fills our hearts with his love (Ro5:5). He opens our spiritual eyes to discern spiritual truth. The famous French Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote that in every human “there’s this infinite abyss [that] can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words, by God himself” (Pascal’s *Penses*, p.75). All our human cravings, helplessness, emptiness and futile efforts to be satisfied by things and people stem from this deep need in our souls for God. And only Jesus can meet this need. Only when we personally put our trust in him and ask him will he give us the living water, the Holy Spirit, and fill us with the love of God.

He also says in verse 14 that this water in us becomes “a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” Not only are our souls quenched, but also we grow deeper and deeper in our knowledge of God. And just as a spring of water quenches the thirst of many, God changes us from those constantly seeking personal satisfaction into those who can actually love others and help them find true satisfaction in their Creator God. It’s so much better to live life not like a bottomless pit of thirstiness, but as someone who has the springs of living water within us. It can happen even to the most unspiritual, broken, thirsty person!

How does she respond? Look at verse 15. She finally stops arguing and admits she’s tired and dissatisfied with her life. She’s starting to realize that Jesus is speaking spiritually, and that he actually has something to give her. At this golden moment, what does he say? Read verse 16. Wow! He seems pretty harsh here. Is he mocking her, or saying her husband is more important than her, or that only along with her husband can she be helped? No. He’s touching a sore spot in her soul. He already knows all about her life, that she’s gone through five husbands, and now is just living with a man without marriage. Why is he bringing this up? It’s not to embarrass her; he’s trying to help her. He’s trying to help her see what’s at the core of all her problems. She’s been seeking satisfaction through having men, and it hasn’t worked at all.

How does she respond? She quickly says, “I have no husband” (17a). Technically she’s right, but she’s trying to avoid the painful subject. So Jesus goes on. Look at verses 17b,18. Although he’s speaking painful truth, he’s doing it so graciously. He’s actually taking her side, saying she’s right and that she’s never had a true husband. He not only knows the details of her life, but also deeply understands her. He’s using truth not to crush, but to heal. He’s speaking the truth in love (Eph4:25). He’s ultimately trying to help her give up on the futile pursuit to find satisfaction in a man’s love. Many women don’t like to admit it, but they’re longing for a “Prince Charming.” The Hallmark Channel has so many movies about women meeting their dream man and in the end getting to marry him. It’s being watched not just by old ladies; it’s very popular with single young women who find it so hard to find the right man. But to be really happy, every woman needs more than a man; she needs a personal relationship with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Only he can satisfy any woman’s soul.

Look at verses 19,20. She again seems to be trying to avoid the subject. But actually she’s not; she’s trying to get at the solution. She’s asking where she can worship God. Can she go to God right here on one of these mountains, or does she really have to go to Jerusalem? It may seem like a silly question, but actually it’s so deep. What she’s really saying is that she wants to go to the right place to get right with God. She wants to come to God in repentance. What a surprise, that this lady with five past husbands and a live-in boyfriend now wants to get right with God! But she does. She has a soul. She’s a precious human being, no less than anyone else, with the capacity to know and be with God.

In verses 21,22 Jesus tells her the physical place is *not* important, but God’s history and way of working *is*. Whether she likes it or not, God has chosen to bring his salvation to this world through the Jews—ultimately, through sending Jesus himself through them. Then he goes on to tell her more about God and about true worship. Read verses 23,24. He’s saying that she’s very close to being one of these true worshipers. Through faith in him she’ll be able to worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, right where she is. God who is Spirit doesn’t like superficial, fake, habitual worship. God is seeking even very unlikely people who will actually worship him in the Spirit and in truth.

Jesus kept his identity a secret to most people of his time, especially the Pharisees. But in verses 25,26 he reveals himself to this woman. To our surprise, even *she* has been waiting for the Messiah to come and explain everything. She’s been longing to meet the one who can be everything to her. Jesus says, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” It’s *Jesus*! He’s speaking to us personally. He’s ready to help us, no matter what we’ve done or how difficult we are. We all need to meet Jesus personally, the only one who can satisfy our thirsty souls, the only one who can be everything to us.

May God help us open our hearts and let Jesus minister to us, show us what we need to repent of, and how he alone can satisfy us. May God also help us learn from Jesus in this passage how to go to unexpected places, break through all kinds of barriers, and really talk to people, even the most unlikely ones, in order to lead them to the living water.