



ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH, CHARLESTON, WV
The Rev. Donald Vinson, interim rector

A SERMON FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT, MARCH 15, 2020

LIVING WATER, LIVING SPIRIT

Was it only last Sunday I commented on this parable in connection with Jesus' admonition to Nicodemus that he must be born again? That seems so long ago now. A lot of little microbes have swept under the bridge since then. In case you missed it, my point was that Jesus never said that (in scripture) to anyone else. To today's guest, he said she needs to drink from living water. There is no major Living Water movement in the church, and it would be based on a partial view of the Way of Jesus if there were. But I also mentioned that he never told the rich young ruler that he must be born again. No, he told that one he must sell everything he had, give away the proceeds, and join Jesus as a disciple. Imagine the uproar if that mandate were to be universally applied as the one to Nicodemus has been! Christianity would never have made it past the Jerusalem city limits! I would submit that it might have had the effect of making that young man for all intents and purposes born again, but it also sent him sorrowfully away! There are dangers to grabbing hold of any one saying of Jesus and projecting that onto all people at all times. Perhaps one reason Living Waterism is not a thing is that who really knows what that movement would be about? The Spirit is like that, hard to pin down. The woman herself seems to have mainly been impressed that Jesus knew so much about her (she said "everything" when she reported the encounter to her neighbors).

This parable has special significance because its subject character is a woman and also because she is a Samaritan. Conventionally, the two of them were not supposed to be speaking to one another. Neither of them is a slave to convention. The woman is at the well, and that tells us something about her: hauling water is women's and children's work; she is doing it herself, so she has no children at home. She is also the only one at the well. Has she chosen a slack time to visit, maybe because she is not well accepted by the other women of the village? We find out later why she might not be.

She is forward. Of course, Jesus did speak to her first, but she recovers quickly and engages in a respectful but frank discussion with him. For his part, he addresses her, remarkably, in just the same challenging and personal way he would have with a male Jew. These factors have been instructive to us as we have considered moving toward full equality in the roles of women in church life.

But what is this about Living Water? In Judaism, living water is water that flows, as in an open stream. It is the desired water for baptism (note that John the Baptizer goes out to the Jordan, which has its own significance, for his activities). If no stream is available, at least pouring the water, making it move, is called for in purification rituals. We do that in baptisms ourselves, and in case you didn't know, we are in no way opposed to immersion baptisms in a creek or river, in warm weather if you please. The water the woman is drawing from the well is not living, not above ground, anyway, and perhaps that is what prompts Jesus' comment.

You know from his story of the Good Samaritan (not his title) that Jesus has nothing categorically against Samaritans. A right-hearted Samaritan can be righteous in the sight of God. Yet notice how Jesus and the woman go quickly into point and counter-point on issues that separate Samaritans from Jews. Jesus has no hesitation in criticizing the interpretations of Pharisees and Sadducees about Judaism (or just "life in God" as Jesus would practice it), and he is not about to go easy on Samaritanism, either. The woman challenges the Sadducees' dictum that only Jerusalem is the proper place for worship of God. The Samaritans have worshipped and sacrificed on the mountain tops for centuries, since before the

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Babylonian Captivity. Like the Sadducees, they accept only the Torah as Holy Writ, but like the Pharisees, they do look for a coming Messiah. Jesus, while siding generally with Jewish understandings, does not defend any one in particular. Both Jews and Samaritans are going to have to accustom themselves to some changes. This change amounts to putting aside worshipping the concept of God in favor of worshipping the very nature of God. Righteousness comes not from knowing about God but from knowing God. Anyone can do that, Jew or Samaritan, Sadducee or Pharisee, scribe or sinner.

We Christians have a lot to learn from this story. We are fragmented into numberless denominations and quasi-denominations, each acting as if we were the only one. What a small-minded God and what a tiny heaven we would have if that were the case! We need to brace ourselves for some big surprises.

Years ago, when I was an assistant at the congregation serving Alabama's wealthiest town, I was driving through the park-like setting one Sunday morning heading for 8 a.m. Eucharist. I kept passing mailboxes with large, white bows on them, and I wondered what that was all about. I was accustomed to the pink or blue ones announcing a new birth in the household - we found one on our own mailbox when Philip was born. I could not imagine there being so many engagements, weddings, or deaths all at once. When I arrived at church, I consulted my source of all local knowledge, Susan Sloan, then the Christian Formation director. "Oh, last night was 'Squeal Night' for the high school sororities," she said. "The girls found out what sorority had accepted them, or not. The bow means they got in one."

My mind went immediately to the undetermined number of high school girls who were not accepted into a sorority. Why do high schools need sororities, anyway? There were an awful lot of mailboxes with no bow on them, all possibilities for shattered, red-eyed high school girls within. "Why don't they just divide them all up among themselves and leave out the rejection part of it?" I asked. Susan looked at me sadly, as my momma's slow child. "You don't know teenage girls very well, do you?" she said.

I guess I don't. I don't understand teenage boys very well, either, or any group who never grow out of their exclusivist teen stage. I don't understand denominations who teach that they are the only ones in heaven. I don't understand churches who cling to one or two key doctrines that set them against and above all others. I don't understand putting God in our box and wrapping her up all snug and tight. The Spirit was not made for a box and won't stay in one! The Spirit is free!

If we want to live in the Spirit, we must drink of the Living Water, and not once, but regularly. We must look for God where God chooses to be (and I'm not saying on golf courses, necessarily), not where we expect to find God. We must stop trying to impose our rules on God and start paying more attention to the very few rules that God would have us apply to ourselves.

This from the Messiah himself, who tells us everything we ever did. But loves us anyway.