

Lent 3, Year A
John 4:5-42
March 19, 2017
Bill Ellis

The Woman at the Well is among the most remarkable characters in John's Gospel, much more interesting, as I see it, than Nicodemus, the solid and ever-so-slightly pedantic character we encountered in last week's gospel reading. Here is a Samaritan woman willing to match words with a Jewish Rabbi, something that in that era could have gotten both of them in trouble. Many wonderful sermons and meditations have been created just by reflecting on that woman and her meeting with Jesus. This evening I want concentrate on a different theme based upon the development of the plot of this story. By a series of what I would call successive approximations she comes to realize that she is in the presence of the Messiah, the one who has come to fulfill the promises God made to Abraham, the ancestor common to both of them. This happens because the story moves from the question of what sustains mere existence to what sustains true life. The story is important because the answer to both questions is the same now as it was when John wrote this story.

We all know what sustains existence; it is the material things of this world, food, shelter, water. We also know that community is important to existence, without it people fail to thrive, and more often than we imagine the loss of a sense of community is a cause of death for people of all ages. I still remember

the experiments with monkeys I read about in one of the few psychology classes I took when I was an undergraduate. Baby monkeys were given all the food, shelter, and warmth they needed to live, but they were deprived of any contact either with their mothers or people. Soon those babies began to exhibit psychotic behavior and most of them died. Subsequent research into people of all ages deprived of meaningful human contact reveals a similar pattern. Truly we primates do not live by bread alone.

John makes this point about mere existence through the contrivance of Jesus' request for a drink of water. This initiates the teaching about the difference between "running" water, as in a stream that sustains existence, and "living" water as that force or power which brings one to the life of the new or eternal aeon. Just as the answer to the question of what sustains existence is obvious, so too is the answer to the question of what gives deep and true and real life. We get real life from truly and deeply acknowledging that we are created by God, that we depend upon God not just for existence but for everything that makes existence worthwhile, and by living lives that reflect not only our gratitude, but our devotion to the God who has made us possible. As the woman at the well moves from believing she is dealing with a rather impertinent rabbi, through thinking he is a prophet to realizing he is the very presence of God, she finds that she has now received the water that makes for that new life that sustains forever. Notice this is not that she has reached a different opinion about Jesus than she held formerly. That happens, but more

important it is that she has been transformed by him, and now believes in him. Jesus has become the means by which she understands herself, her purpose, and her destiny. This is what happens in and to everyone who comes to realize there is more to life than mere existence.

Often this development stops short of genuine dependence upon God. People discover their purpose and identity in a great variety of things, family, career, and hobbies often prove to be among the things that give people a sense of vitality and purpose that feels, at least for a while, like real life. Because all these things are mortal they must ultimately fail if we live long enough, and unless we move on from them to something greater still life will ultimately feel empty and largely devoid of purpose. We know this because it is readily observable in others, and as well most of us have at least once in a while felt it in ourselves. Even when they don't fail us, either age or disease will cause us to fail them, as people discover they can no longer participate in the activities that once gave them such a sense of vitality.

Devotion to country or religion can also feel like the source of real life, and it is more durable, because both our country and our religion are indeed going to outlive every single one of us. But those too cannot satisfy the thirst for real life, something all of us, nor nearly all of us, have experienced as well. Countries change; their mores and ethos evolve, the scale tips to the right or to the left, and the source our great security becomes at times the source of the greatest threats to our sense of well-being. Religion also changes; practices, patterns, theology,

all evolve over time, seeking always to move ever more deeply into the mystery of God among us, but at times going in directions that one group or another become convinced is completely wrong. There again the source of comfort and reassurance becomes the source of anxiety and unrest.

Only when people finally see what the woman at the well saw, that we are in the hands of a creator who knows and accepts us, who made us, and in whose care we will find our entire destiny do people discover that water which wells up to the life of the eternal age. Yet this is precisely where many people earnestly seeking real life misunderstand the relationship between the source of existence and the source of life. Existence comes from the material world, but God, the source of real life, "is Spirit," as Jesus tells the woman at the well. It is therefore natural to draw a line between the material and the spiritual and declare that the spiritual is the only thing that is valuable, because it is the source of real life, while the material is the source mere of existence.

Such a view is mistaken because it misunderstands something important, which is that the spiritual is always mediated to us through the material. At least in this realm the stuff of this mere existence is the means by which God brings the power and presence of real life to us. If we are to apprehend that the source of true life is God, that discovery comes to us through our minds, we feel it in our bodies, and we express our gratitude for it by doing real and tangible things in this world right now.

Most simply put true life is not the means by which we escape mere existence. True life is the means by which our mere existence is transformed into something deeply meaningful that participates in that which endures forever. I have had the privilege of listening to a couple of people who have had to work through some very deep grief over the past few years. They are emerging from that grief into a new sense of themselves and their lives. This does not in any way mean that the sense of loss is over, for it will never be over; they will take that to their own graves. What has happened in these people is much more important than that, they have discovered a way to live with that sense of loss differently than they were previously. As one of these people put it, the sense of loss reveals the depth of the love they felt. So at length, the love they felt emerges again and becomes a sustaining power that creates a new energy for real life.

Here is a wonderful example of how the life which God brings does not replace or do away with the existence we have, but rather, the true life which brings has been mediated in these people through their existence, and in so doing has transformed that existence in ways these folks never could have imagined. We see this same process in the happening to the woman at the well. Both before and after her encounter with Jesus she will still be coming to that well for water. The presence of Jesus, showing her that he is not just some weird rabbi, nor a prophet, but the presence and the power of God in this world, changed everything for her. But that whole transformation that God worked in

her was mediated to her through her senses, her experience, her past and present.

That is how it works for us as well. The world we live in is the place our mere existence is to be transformed into real life. That transformation will not be worked in us apart from our material existence, God always and ever mediates it to us through our material existence. If you want to find that source of real life, don't seek to escape what it means to be human, seek instead to delve ever more deeply into what it means to be human, for there you will find God in Christ, and there you will find the water that brings eternal life.