

“The Powerful Symbolism of Water”

John 4:5-42

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Water is a powerful symbol for many reasons. It is a critical resource, absolutely necessary for life. In places like the Middle East, it is perhaps the most critical resource, because of its scarcity, even more so than oil. It's the thing people fight over. For example, if you look at tensions between Israelis and Palestinians, the fight is over land, but if you look closely at the geography, it's the land that has access to water.

And we should add that the most precious water is clean water. In poor regions like sub-Saharan Africa where 1 in 5 children die by the age of 5, the most common cause of death is not exotic tropical illnesses or AIDS, but gastrointestinal illness related to parasites. Simply providing clean water would mean life for millions. It's why digging wells has become a common missions strategy. Clean water means life.

But water isn't just a critical resource, it is a powerful force for good or ill. The latter part of this we know, as much of the damage done by hurricanes has been the result of heavy rain. Our faith may or may not be strong enough to move mountains, but massive amounts of water are. In regard to the first part of this reality, this power water has can also be harnessed for good, as we have seen in the response to the fire...

Water is a powerful symbol for many reasons. Thus, it is a wonderful symbol for eternal life, for what God is doing through the life and ministry of Jesus. John uses other symbols in his telling of the Gospel. John loves symbols, images and double entendres. And in this story, water is a natural part of the narrative. It's what Jesus needs in the heat of the day. But water is also a symbol for eternal life. It is critical and powerful. It is utterly transforming. It changes everything.

One change we see in the story concerns the nature of community, the way people relate to each other across various differences. Before Jesus comes along, relationships are defined by hierarchy and division.

Some people are considered to be better than others, there is much division between groups of people and some are judged more severely for their sins or perceived sins. After Jesus, all of this changes, and all of these issues are embodied in this one person at the well.

Jesus has the longest conversation with this person that he has with anyone, and about substantive matters, but according to the standards of this time, there are at least three reasons why he shouldn't be talking to her at all. First, she is a woman, a woman he does not know. Men don't talk to women because they are deemed to be inferior. She knows this and thus wonders what Jesus is doing. When the disciples come back, they are astonished that Jesus is talking to her! They are smart enough to keep this to themselves, but they are astonished!

Second, she is a Samaritan, one of those half-breed traitors who don't even worship in the right way or at the right place! There is a great deal of bad blood between Jews and Samaritans. There is a lot of history here, as there always is in disputes, but the key issues have to do with perceptions that some Samaritans helped the Assyrians and others intermarried with them when they took the Northern Kingdom. As a result, "we" just don't associate with "them".

Third, this woman, we don't even know her name, has a questionable place in society due to her marital status. We will come back to this later, consider the real-world possibilities for her status, but the fact is she has been married 5 times and the person she is with now is not her husband. No matter how we might make sense of this situation today, in this time, she is viewed as a person of questionable character.

So, why is Jesus talking to her? Because he doesn't buy into the assumptions of hierarchy, division and judgment. He envisions one community where all are of equal value - men and women, Jews and Samaritans, sinners and sinners, since we all are imperfect. Jesus brings the water of life and this water not only changes individuals, it changes community. Since we are all beloved children of God, we are all part of one new family where all divisions, hierarchies and judgments fall.

It is, of course, a work in progress. This is Jesus' vision of the beloved community, and we are called to live toward it, but it has been a struggle from the very beginning. In the book of Acts, we read about the

struggle to extend the Gospel to Gentiles. The Jesus movement begins among Jews, there is much resistance to reaching out to others and to this day, while the Gospel has transcended all national and ethnic boundaries, most individual churches have very little ethnic diversity.

The place of women has been a work in progress as well. Jesus views women as equal partners, but the church has struggled to embrace this value. It's not just the Catholic church that has not allowed women to serve as priests. Most Baptist churches have excluded women until very recently, though we have a better history here, and there is still a low ceiling on leadership for women, though in CBF life, we can take pride in the fact that Suzii Paynter is our national leader!

When it comes to sin and judgment, we still have our lists of what we think matters most, and as in Jesus' day, it's not just sin, but the perception of sin that matters... Jesus envisions a very different kind of community, one place of acceptance for all that transcends all boundaries, but it is, to this day, a work in progress.

A few years ago, I co-taught an Encore course with Dr. Harshaw at the other half of First Baptist Church. It was a course on the history of race and in this particular class, we were talking about the history of our church vis a vis race. It was great experience, and I think we had good material to present, but what I remember most is one question a man asked. "Why is it," he asked, "that Islam has been so much more successful in getting people together across racial and ethnic lines?"

It is true - Islam is a multiethnic faith. Though it began in the Arabian Peninsula, Muslims come from all over the world and the majority are not of Arab ethnicity. Furthermore, while Islam still has limits on women in leadership, several predominately Muslim nations have had female heads of state, something we have not yet experienced. So, we need to be careful with our comparisons.

Dr. Harshaw and I didn't have an answer to the question of why Islam has been able to do this. We did note that they have their struggles too. But our focus was on what we ought to be doing as Christians, that is, living further toward the vision Jesus has given us of a community where the human constructs of hierarchy, division and judgement no longer define experience; a community where his love and

acceptance of all creates one family of equals. Only the water of life, a powerful force for good, can create such a reality.

But in this story from John 4, the water of life changes more than the nature of community. The water of life also changes the way people worship. As the dialogue continues, the woman recognizes Jesus as some kind of prophet and thus decides to talk to him about some important theological matters. “Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain,” she says, Mt Gerizim, “but you say the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” They not only worship in a different place, and in a different temple, they have a different version of the Torah and it is the only scripture they use. So, their worship is different. They are descended from the northern tribes of Israel, they are not *goyim*, heathen, complete outsiders, strictly speaking, but they are not one of us either. She wants to know what to do with this difference.

In his response, Jesus favors his strand of the faith. “You worship what you do not know,” he says, “for salvation is from the Jews.” But his primary answer is this. “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” Then, he goes on to say, “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth... God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” This is how most translations read, but the Hebrew may be employing a poetic device which ought to be translated “spirit *of* truth.”

Either way, Jesus shifts the framework of analysis. Previously, arguments about who is worshiping God correctly hinge on where worship happens, in which worship space, and with what texts. What really matters, Jesus says, is what’s in the hearts of the worshipers, whether they offer praise to God in spirit and truth or in a spirit of truth. It’s not about the place or the forms, but the hearts of the people, the honest yearning to connect human spirits with God’s Spirit. It is a game changer in Jesus’ time, a big game changer, as it is in ours.

We don’t fuss about the location. Nor do most stress out over textual matters, though some do. But there are other aspects of worship about which churches argue. I’m not just talking about disputes over

contemporary or traditional forms, but how clergy dress, with or without robes or coats and ties; how much liturgy is used, including the place of creeds; who is welcome at communion and who is baptized; on what day of the week we worship and whether musical instruments are used at all.

Which is the right way to worship? If we take our cue from Jesus, there is no one right way. There are many different ways that help many different people. What matters is that we are offering praise and devotion to God in a spirit of truth. What matters is why we are here. What matters is what's in our hearts. To move worship in this direction, though, requires a powerful force for good. It requires the water of life.

There is one other change the water of life brings in this story, perhaps the most central change, change in individual lives, beginning with the woman's. In part, it's simply a matter of meeting Jesus, the Messiah, and drinking his gift of eternal life. But the transformation he makes possible affects every aspect of life.

Before meeting Jesus, she is a person with little value. She is a woman, unworthy of speaking to a man; she is a Samaritan, unworthy of interacting with a Jew; and she is a woman of questionable character due to her marital status. Whether she sees herself in such a limited way or not, this is the way she is viewed in society and she knows she has to function according to societal norms. Furthermore, once you function according to such norms for any length of time, you cannot help but begin to accept this definition of your worth.

And before we get to Jesus' transformation of all of this, it's worth revisiting the woman's marital status. Why has she been married 5 times? Either all 5 husbands died, and perhaps she is the victim of Levirate marriage; she has been divorced by 5 men, since she cannot do the divorcing; or some combination of the two. In any of these scenarios, she may be more of a victim than a difficult or promiscuous woman. We don't really know, but we do tend to assume something negative on her behalf, which is, to this day, a common tendency vis a vis the poor and outcast.

But no matter what the story is behind her marital status, Jesus sees her in a different way. Simply by talking to her, he conveys a sense of

value. In fact, she is not only worthy of conversation, she has something he needs – a bucket with which to draw water. But he doesn't just talk to her; he has a long, substantive conversation with her. She listens to Jesus like an ideal student or disciple. And at the end of the conversation, Jesus does something he doesn't do with many Jewish males – he openly discloses his identity as the Messiah - at which point she goes into town and gives witness to her experience, and because she does, others drink the water of life and are transformed.

So, as Jesus brings the water of life, individual lives are transformed – first the woman, then other people in her community, and finally women throughout the ages because if this woman can serve as a model disciple and witness, so can they! This is change, powerful change, change that is available to everyone who drinks the water of life.

In her short story “The River” Flannery O'Connor describes the experience of a boy named Bevel who is changed by powerful water. He comes from a broken home. His mamma, who is raising him, has a drinking problem. So, he struggles at school and doesn't even want to go home to his apartment. He ends up being taken to the river where a preacher who shares his name is baptizing people.

He watches with curiosity until the preacher asks him if he wants to be baptized. “What's that?” he murmurs. “If I baptize you,” the preacher says, “you'll be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ. You'll be washed in the river of suffering, son. And you'll go by the deep river of life. Do you want that?” “Yes,” says the boy, still not understanding, thinking mostly that he won't have to go back home. “You won't be the same again,” the preacher says, “You'll count.” And then, he puts him under. “You count now,” he says, “you didn't even count before.”

It's the beginning of a new life for Bevel, and while we might say he counted before, he just didn't know it; now he does know it, now he is able to claim the value on his life God has bestowed.

That's powerful stuff whenever it happens to any of us, but water works this way. The water of life works his way. The way we relate to each other, the way we worship God, even who we are – everything is transformed by this powerful force! Thanks be to God!