

“Quenching Your Spiritual Thirst”  
Exodus 17: 1 – 17    John 4: 5 – 42  
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The Bible is filled with wonderfully rich stories that can be immensely satisfying whenever we open ourselves to their truths. Such stories can also help us be aware of our prejudices and presuppositions. The stories also teach us about ourselves, making it possible for us to enrich our experiences of life. Today’s story about Jesus’ meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well does all of this. Part of the power of this story comes from the long-standing hard feelings between the Judeans and the Samaritans. It is difficult to imagine any time or place where two groups of people have had more mutual suspicion and hatred towards each other. Well, I suppose “red states’ vs. blue states has come close in recent years. That he talks to her at all is amazing to her as it would be to anyone else from that time in history.

We could build this sermon around the intergenerational feud between the Israelites and the Samaritans, but we’ll leave that for another time. Instead, I want to consider the dynamics of human spiritual thirst, including an exploration of the means to “quench” it. Do you ever wonder why we even have such a spiritual thirst, anyway? Where does it come from? What approaches to dealing with spiritual thirst have we been taught by our culture? And what, if anything, actually works to quench it? I invite us to consider Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman as we look for some possible answers.

Ronald Rolheiser, in his book called “The Holy Longing”, writes about the desire, apparently embedded in all of creation, that encourages us to relate and connect with people and connect with other parts of creation. This urge to connect is present in absolutely everything, from the most sub-atomic of particles to the largest suns and galaxies. And certainly we human beings have it. Much of the impulse is good, but like anything else real, it comes with dangers and costs. We begin in our earliest years to reach out for those things that promise to assuage our hungers and thirsts. While most of us in this country have ready access to sufficient nourishment to keep us healthy, our relational lives seem to include lots of disconnections. The availability of food and drink, entertainment, and other distractions often keep us from finding appropriate ways to understand and meet our more spiritual needs, when we even notice them. Among other things, we use food, touch, and productivity to distract us from the emptiest of places in our human experience. Unfortunately for all of us, the elevation of money above all else in our culture has had the effect of swamping us with an overabundance of attractive things and distracting behaviors. These serve to fill up the spaces in our emptiness but they do not, make that cannot, satisfy. In fact, whenever we inevitably attempt to satisfy our needs with such superficial things, our cravings actually increase. This is fundamentally an addictive process.

From our scripture reading, it appears that this Samaritan woman may have fallen into such a pattern. Jesus responds to that place of spiritual emptiness in her that she has never known how to address adequately. If we were to take a judgmental look at this woman, we could easily conclude that she was fundamentally a morally flawed person. (Certainly not like the rest of us!) We could then advise her simply to stop the immoral behavior of having one husband after another. Of course, judging what someone else should do is always easy. In fact, it’s always

easier to say how someone else should live than it is to look honestly at ourselves and to identify our own distracting and potentially addictive behaviors.

If we look at this woman's life from the perspective of addiction theory, it is possible not only to be more compassionate towards her, but it is also possible for us to learn what is so strikingly different about Jesus' offerings to her and, by extension, to us. Rather than judging her, Jesus just tells her that he knows, (and probably understands) her history. Among other things, she has had several husbands. This is important information. I have known many people over the years who have had a succession of spouses. To a careful observer, it seems like those people keep marrying the same type of person over and over again. But to hear the serial "marry-er" tell it, each new spouse is expected to be so different from the last one. Such a person hopes to experience a more satisfying result with this latest spouse, but it almost never happens that way. I can easily see this Samaritan woman as a pretty normal person who is just looking for some comfort and satisfaction in life. Unfortunately, the next relationship turns out not to be so different after all, but rather looks a lot like the last one. It appears that finally, in her discouragement and disappointment, the Samaritan woman doesn't even bother to marry again. What's the use?! We also must remember that she lived in a radically patriarchal culture where she, like many other women, had no political or social power of her own. It is entirely possible that she was the unhappy victim of the unjust, male oriented, divorce laws. Perhaps remaining unmarried was ultimately the only way for her to have any semblance of power at all.

Whatever explanation was hiding behind her behavior, Jesus seems not to be distracted by the human temptation to judge. Instead, Jesus sees right through what is superficial in her: he sees right into her soul. When she hears his accurate description of her life, she is understandably amazed. But, as one who is in the business of observing people, I can tell you that what he described of her life was not that difficult to figure out. A small amount of intuition can go a long way.

What is most amazing about Jesus perceptiveness in this dialogue is that he sees right into the empty place in her soul. He sees that she is trying to meet some deep need and he understands that her approach has not been successful, whether the failed marriages were her fault or not. It is important to note that Jesus does not "moralize" at her. He does not advise her to change her ways in order to be more socially or religiously acceptable. He simply states his observations and then offers her a different way to quench her spiritual thirst.

We, too, carry these empty places in our souls. This emptiness is not all bad. In fact it holds great possibilities. But, unrecognized and unexamined, such empty places may manifest as loneliness or depression. They may result in our over-working or in eating or drinking too much. We may try to fill the empty places with titles or we may strive to comfort our restless souls by attaining positions or power or influence. Even participation in a church can turn out to be an unsuccessful attempt at quenching our spiritual thirst.

So how does Jesus teach her to address her emptiness? He talks to her about worship. The issue between the Judeans and the Samaritans had to do with the "correct" place and method of worship. (And of course, when temple offerings are at issue, there's a lot of money to be made by the city that has the franchise.) Jesus, however, cuts through the more superficial layers of the

issue (like money) by referring to proper worship as that which is done “in spirit and in truth”. Worship is not primarily about place, nor is it about particular forms or rituals. Jesus knows that all distraction and addiction is fundamentally dishonest. Addiction offers us an altered sense of reality, but never the truth. So worship done “in truth” helps us see life and our own selves more clearly, not less clearly.

The worship “in spirit” is more difficult to define. The realm of the spirit is not the same as the realm of concrete understanding. Worshipping in spirit does not allow us the privilege of believing we are “right”. We only have the power to be faithful. Another characteristic of spirit is that it requires the experience of emptiness. Fasting, for example, has emptying as its primary purpose. Giving up something for Lent sometimes intends for us to find more spiritual space. Jesus says that in order to gain life, you must lose it. Likewise, in order to be spiritually creative, we must empty ourselves and befriend the emptiness.

If we follow Jesus’ example, we, also, will choose to empty ourselves as he did. This emptying is not simply a matter of sacrifice. We do not have to prove anything to God by means of our ability to empty. The process of emptying is ultimately for our own benefit. It is only from emptiness that true creativity springs. According to Genesis, God set the stage by creating the universe out of the void: “from nothing”. This was not done to impress us with God’s greatness. Rather, God simply demonstrated the nature of creativity itself.

As we traverse this Lenten season, we will be tempted as always to fill up the spaces in our lives with any number of distractions. Unfortunately, if we succumb to the temptations, we will end up feeling emptier than before. We will not experience satisfaction, and we will not be able to experience the wonders of resurrection.

Jesus didn’t just talk about emptying one’s self for spiritual purpose; he also demonstrated emptying. He showed us that status and power could never be as effective as integrity in helping us live a meaningful life.

Whenever we gather for worship, work, or fun as a community of faith, it helps to empty ourselves of presuppositions, prejudices, and even particular ideas about how things should turn out. Only then can we have enough space to relate deeply to one another, and then, together, to worship in spirit and in truth. In this way we build up the Kingdom of God.