

STREAMS OF LIVING WATER

March 27, 2011

Moen...Peerless...Grohe...Price-Pfister...American-Standard...and, of course, Kohler: what do they make? Toilets...and faucets, absolutely! They make faucets: shiny, stylish devices that put water of potable purity, and unlimited quantity, and perfect temperature...right at our fingertips

But, you know, water is more than simply a pressurized and plumbed convenience. Water is the elixir of life...and it's the engine of life's destruction. It's the wind of Hurricane Katrina...and the wave of the tsunami in the Pacific that destroyed Japan. It's the drought of 1930s American Dust Bowl...and it's the horror of the drought in contemporary Darfur.

And water in our world...even though we all know how those faucets work...water in our world is becoming ever more scarce, and ever more precious. According to the United Nations, water use in our world is growing at more than twice the rate of population in this last century. There is, the U.N. tells us, enough fresh water in the world for six billion people, but water suffers from waste, and uneven distribution, and pollution. Water: our common need...and our constant thirst.

The Israelites were camped in the wilderness at a place named Rephidim, and there, at Rephidim, the Israelites were thirsty. There was no water to drink, and they were parched. And as they were wont to do, they took their problem to Moses, their leader, and they demanded that he give them some water. They said to Moses, the one who had saved them from slavery in Egypt: ***All you did was bring us out here to the wilderness to die of thirst.*** And so Moses did what he did when the people of Israel complained to him: he went and complained to God. And God said: ***Moses, you take that rod that you've got, the one that you used to strike the Nile and turn it to blood – the one that created the first plague – you take that rod and you go to the rock and you strike it.***

And, lo and behold, Moses did...and from the rock came streams of water. And the people of Israel had their thirst quenched. Yet, what was remembered about that place was how the people of Israel complained. So Moses named it Massah and Meribah because the people complained and they said: ***Will God quench our thirst, or not?***

It was a dry and a dusty road through Samaria from Judea to Galilee, and it was high noon, and Jesus was parched. And so Jesus sought relief at the well that Father Jacob had given to his son, Joseph. But, there were two problems at the well. The first was a practical issue: the well was deep, and Jesus had nothing with which to draw the water out. That was the practical issue. Then there was the social stigma. There was a person at the well to help him, except she was a Samaritan woman.

Now this Samaritan woman was the bigger problem. She was Jesus' bigger problem. You see, in Jesus' day, men and women did not speak to each other in public. And then there was the matter of her nationality. She was a Samaritan, and Jews hated Samaritans, and Samaritans hated Jews. Samaritans, you see, were beneath the Jews because Samaritans perverted the religion of Israel. It's kind of like how liberal Protestants feel about fundamentalist Christians...or how in a former day Roman Catholics and Protestants used to feel about each other. Jews hated Samaritans...and the Samaritans hated the Jews.

It was like segregation in the American South, and that segregation also had to do with water, you know. There were separate water fountains in the American South – bubblers we call them up here in the north. Inside there was a nice cold one for the white folks...and outside there was a dirty old rusty one for the colored folks. And colored folks didn't speak to white folks in public: that is, unless they were spoken to first...and they certainly didn't speak to women. That would be uppity. The proper stance for colored folks meeting white folks was with head bowed and eyes down.

This year our Lenten Cluster is reading a book titled The Same Kind of Different as Me. It's written by two authors. The one's name is Denver Moore. Denver writes this:

I was maybe fifteen, sixteen years old, walkin down the red dirt road that passed by the front of the cotton plantation where I lived in Red River Parish, Louisiana. Purty soon, I seen this white lady standin by her car, a blue Ford, 'bout a 1950, '51 model, somethin like that. Looked to me like she was tryin to figure out how to fix a flat tire. So I stopped.

"You need some help, ma'am?"

"Yes, thank you," she said, lookin purty grateful to tell the truth. "I really do."

Well, 'bout the time I got the tire fixed, here come three white boys ridin outta the woods on bay horses. One of them, dark-haired and kinda weasel-lookin, put one hand on his saddle horn and pushed back his hat with the other.

"Boy, what you doin' botherin this nice lady?"

Then the boy closest to me slung a grass rope around my neck, like he was ropin a calf. He jerked it tight, cuttin my breath. The noose poked into my neck like burrs, and fear crawled up through my legs into my belly.

"We gon' teach you a lesson about botherin white ladies," said the one holdin the rope. I don't like to talk much 'bout what happened next, 'cause I ain't lookin for no pity party. That's just how things was in Louisiana in those days.

And that's just how things was in Israel in Jesus' day. But Jesus paid no mind to the fact that the only other person at Jacob's well was a Samaritan woman. Instead, Jesus asked her straight up for a drink. And that woman? Well, she was so shocked that she spoke to Jesus before she could stop herself.

How could you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?

Well, Jesus' answer was to offer *her* a drink...a drink of something he called "living water." And He said of this water that He offered her: *You'll never be thirsty again. It's gonna be a gusher*, He said, *a gusher of eternal life*.

Then Jesus told her to call her husband. And, when He told her that, that woman, she swallowed hard and she said: ***I have no husband.*** Well, that wasn't a lie...but it wasn't exactly the truth, either. Jesus said to her:

You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you've had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!'

The person who stood before Jesus was a woman...she was a Samaritan...and her moral character was very questionable. You know, that's why she came to the well at noon, at high noon, instead of in the cool of the morning...because that's when she could come by herself and not with all the others...because, if she came with all the others, they would spend their time judging her, and ridiculing her, and making fun of her, and condemning her, and secretly worrying that she might steal one of their husbands, too.

This woman was reprehensible. She was not worth Jesus' time or His concern. She was human trash. Yet Jesus spoke to her, and Jesus offered her living water. Jesus did not judge her. Jesus did not reject her. Jesus did not ridicule her. Jesus did not make a joke out of her. Jesus did not condemn her. No, Jesus just loved her. And then He invited her. Jesus said:

It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't even matter where or how you worship. No, just draw from my well that never shall run dry.

And do you know what happened? Well, what happened is that this nobody became a somebody. This piece of human trash became a child of God. Yes, this woman was changed. She was transformed. She was made new because she drank the living water from the gushing spring of Jesus...because she opened her heart. She opened her heart to Jesus and dedicated her life to His love.

And then do you know what she did? She went straight back to that village of hers...the village where her people judged her, and rejected her, and ridiculed her, and made fun of her, and condemned her...and she did exactly what Jesus did...she offered salvation to those very people who skewered her with sin every day. She invited them to come to Jesus and to drink of the living water of His eternal love.

And in that one gesture, all the oppressive distinctions disappeared. All the social stratifications and elitist proprieties were invalidated. All the poison and the pain that we perpetuate today were washed away by the living water of Jesus' promise and purpose for tomorrow. That woman didn't know it, but she was open and affirming!

Well, that's an old story from a time that's long ago and a place that's far away. What could it possibly have to say to us today? Well, maybe it speaks to our state, our state that's so hopelessly divided – where each side in a budget and policy debate demonizes the other – maybe it invites us to trade the destructive weapons of insult and anger for the grace, and the acceptance, and the healing, and the humility, and the dignity of the living water of Jesus' love: love that transforms us, and fills our hearts, and makes us whole.

Can you believe that? Can you do that? No matter what your past...no matter what your pride or your fame...no matter what your pain or your shame...the love of Jesus can save you and make you new.

You see, friends, this story of the women at the well is a story of personal salvation. This woman was changed, she was redeemed, she was brought home to Jesus. How about you? Do you need to come home, too? Do you need to be saved, made whole?

It's a story of personal salvation...but it's also a story of social transformation. The woman at the well was a nobody who Jesus made into a somebody. And that means that we can never again tolerate a society where nobodies are acceptable. How about you? Can you work to change society so that every nobody becomes a somebody?

This is a story of personal salvation. It is a story of social transformation but, most importantly I think for us, it is a story of evangelism. This woman tells the story of Jesus and how He changed her life to her village...to the people who despised her. Now we have a hard time telling the story of Jesus to the people who love us...but she told that story to the people who hated her; to the people who condemned her and ridiculed her and rejected her. And then she invited them to come...to come with her to living water.

The church sometimes gets hung up on trying to decide what people want from it. It's kind of a marketing question: *What is it we need to offer that people want?* What the woman at the well tells us so clearly is that it's not about what people want; it's about what they need...and she found out that what she needed was Jesus. So that's what we need to offer...the living water of Jesus' love. As the song says:

Like the woman at the well I was seeking, for things that could not satisfy...

Jesus' message to the woman at the well is the message of the United Church of Christ:

No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here!

It's the message that we *must* share because there's no alternative. If we don't share it, we fail our Lord:

No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here!

Yes, dear friends, into the wilderness of our lives a stream of living water flows. It flows out of the mighty rock of God's love. That mighty rock is Jesus. He is for each of us...for each of us, and there are no distinctions. And He is for all of us, and there are no exceptions. And, with the water of His love, there is no shortage.

So fill your cups, and drink until you never thirst again. Fill your hearts with living water, and live until death itself no longer casts its shadow over you.

Yes, open your hearts to Jesus. Drink deep from the living water of His love. And know the joy of doing His saving work and sharing His good news, every day...every day...every day!
Amen.

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