

February 15, 2004  
Psalm 46, John 4:4-30, 39-42  
Dr. Lewis Galloway

### “Streams of Living Water”

The sanctuary of the congregation I serve is long and narrow. From the pulpit, it is hard to see what is going on in the back of the church. When I mentioned this to a member, she very quickly responded, “I’ll tell you what goes on in the back of the church. We sit there. Last week a young man with slumped shoulders and a scowl on his face came in with an elderly gentleman. The young man obviously didn’t want to be there. He must have been the older man’s transportation. The young man worked on a crossword puzzle through the whole service. One time a young woman painted her fingernails during the sermon. The sharp aroma of the polish filled the area like incense. Another Sunday I saw a lady balancing her check book and two kids playing hangman on the back of the bulletin. One time I watched a man slip unnoticed past the ushers and greeters and slide into a pew. He had such an expression of loneliness and pain on his face that it made you want to cry.” After hearing all that, I wasn’t so sure I wanted to be able to see all the way to the back! There is more going on in church than meets the eye.

From the great distance of time and culture, it is hard to see what is going on in this story from John’s gospel. It is long and complicated. It has many turns and twists. It is a story about some people who gather at a well. A well was a kind of meeting place where people went to get the water that was necessary for life and to talk about everything from the weather to the neighbors, from the family to God. It was, you might say, rather like a church where people gather to do all kinds of things. There is more going on in this story than meets the eye.

At first glance, there doesn’t seem to be anything out of the ordinary about this scene. There is nothing odd about a tired and thirsty man stopping to refresh himself with a drink of cool water or a Samaritan woman drawing water from her ancestral well. Yet, it is a story full of sharp contrasts and subtle irony. Jesus is a Jewish man from Galilee. He has no business entering into a conversation with a Samaritan woman. Strangely enough, the thirsty Jesus has living water to give. The woman, who has water and bucket, has a thirst that nothing that comes out of that well can ever satisfy. A conversation that begins on the surface suddenly plunges into the depths of life like a bucket falling into the depths of Jacob’s well.

She is taken aback by Jesus’ request for a drink of water. He is a Jew who looks down on her as someone unclean. He is more than just another stranger from a different religious tradition. He is someone greater than her ancestor Jacob who gave them this well. He has something to give her that she cannot get from anyone else. He offers “living water” that will rise up to become a stream that flows to eternal life. He is not just talking about moving water in a stream or water that bubbles up from a spring. He is speaking of the life giving water of the Holy Spirit.

This the same water of which the Psalmist speaks: "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God." The enemies of Israel had laid siege to Jerusalem. The city was surrounded. The people wondered if their food and water supplies would hold out. It looked as if the whole world were coming to an end; the earth was shaking and the mountains were about to fall into the sea. Suddenly the Psalmist remembers that the hope of Israel lies not in weapons of war, human skill, or even unlimited supplies of food and water. Israel's strength is found in the Lord. There is no physical river running through Jerusalem. The river is the presence of God in the midst of the people. The Psalmist calls the people to remember, "Be still and know that I am God."

The Samaritan woman does not yet know this. She does not yet know who it is that offers her this water or what kind of water this is. It is only when the conversation suddenly takes an odd turn that she begins to understand. Jesus tells her to get her husband. She confesses that she has no husband. Jesus says, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband."

There is more going on here than meets the eye. The eyes of tradition have not been able to see all the way to the back of the church. The eyes of tradition have seen this woman as a sinner who has flaunted the covenant of marriage and gone from one man to the next. Traditional interpretations have ignored the fact that in Jewish culture a woman could not divorce a man, but a man could divorce his wife. According to Jewish tradition a woman could be put away for a multitude of reasons: from being a lousy cook to talking back to her husband and from committing adultery to not being able to bear children. Perhaps this woman has been rejected by one man after another. She has been "put away" and counted as worthless. Perhaps she has never really known what it is to have a husband - that is, a partner who loves her, understands her, accepts her, counts her as someone of great worth, and seeks her well being. It happens all the time.

Delia Grinstead is the main character in the Baltimore writer Anne Tyler's novel, *Ladder of Years*. She is a married woman with three almost-grown children. One year while on a vacation at the beach, she walks away from her family and catches a ride to a small town where she begins a new life. At first it seems that her family hardly notices her absence. The notice of her disappearance doesn't even appear in the Baltimore paper until three days later. Delia reads how her own family described her to the Baltimore police: "A slender, small-boned women with curly fair or light brown hair, Mrs. Grinstead stands 5'2" or possibly 5'5" and weighs either 90 or 110 pounds. Her eyes are blue or gray or perhaps green...family members could not agree about her clothing. In all probability it was something pink or blue, her husband suggested, either frilled or 'looking kind of baby-doll.' Closing the paper, Delia thought to herself, "For heaven's sake, hadn't anyone in her family ever looked at her?"

There is more going on at the well than meets the eye. A Samaritan woman finally discovers a man who really looks at her, understands her, and accepts her as she is. She tells the town, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done."

All this takes place at a well – Jacob’s well. A well. It was at a well that Jacob met Rachel his beloved wife. It was at a well that Abraham’s servant found Rebekah who would become the wife of Isaac. According to Dr. Frances Taylor Gench, a well was a place where people met and contracted marriages. Could we not say that this Samaritan woman who had been passed over by six men finally found in Jesus someone who would love and cherish her?

Here we are at the well again. There is more going on here than meets the eye. Here we are gathered for worship after our own journeys this week. You may have had days that were all too full of disappointments and all too empty of joys. Someone here passed through days of waiting for good news or enduring the impact of bad news. Some come full of energy with a sense of what has been accomplished this week; others come barely able to put one foot in front of the other with lives that have been running on empty too long. Whatever your life has been like this week, we are waiting, working crossword puzzles, playing hangman, balancing a checkbook, thinking about a child in trouble or praying about a marriage that is falling apart. We are waiting, hoping, and expecting something or someone, even if we are not sure quite what. There is more going on here than meets the eye. Here God meets us with living water that flows to eternal life.

If someone from the outside were to look in on our gathering today, they might not see anything extraordinary about it. They might think of church as stone, wood, glass and pew. They might only see robed preachers, choir members and sleepy parishioners. Is this all there is to a church? No. In E. M. Forster’s novel, *A Room with A View*, an iconoclastic English tourist named Mr. Emerson is visiting the cathedral of Santa Croce in Florence Italy. He watches a young Italian child playing in the cathedral. The child trips over the carved recumbent stone figure of a bishop covering the saintly man’s tomb. Seeing the child get hurt, Mr. Emerson cries out, “Hateful Bishop... hard in life; hard in death... intolerable Bishop. Here’s a mess. A baby hurt, cold and frightened, but what else can you expect from a church?”

What else can you expect from a church? I expect what you expect. Not cold stone, but warm hearts that are alive with a love for Christ. Not closed minds, but minds that are open to the movement of God’s Spirit. Not idle hands, but hands that are eager to serve others in need. Here is Christ’s body; here among Christ’s people there is living water for all. The Holy Spirit is with us as “a river whose streams make glad the city of God.”

A church is not stone but a stream of living water. Second Presbyterian Church has a great heritage, a stream of living tradition of those whose lives have been touched and transformed by God. We enter the life-giving stream of the tradition of those who have gone before us – faithful teachers, youth leaders, mission workers and musicians; all servants of Christ. Down through the years, this congregation has been carried into the deeper waters of the Spirit by faithful pastors like Henry Ward Beecher, Jean Milner and Bill Enright.

A church is a stream, a fountain of living water that gushes up and becomes a life-giving stream to others, carrying us all in its power. There is a woman named Kat in the congregation I serve who has been blind since birth. For many years, she has put off having a recommended operation to remove her eyes that have given her a great deal of pain and trouble. The surgery was scheduled for this past Thursday. There is a group of women in our congregation who have started a prayer shawl ministry. These women knit beautiful wool shawls to give to people in the congregation who are facing serious struggles and challenges. As they knit, the women pray for the needs of others. On Wednesday afternoon, two women and I visited Kat to give her a prayer shawl before her surgery. When we gave her the shawl, she wrapped it around her shoulders. She asked what color it was. When we told her it was blue, she said, "Just the color my new eyes will be." She stood up and asked that we pray. We joined hands and prayed with her. The next morning I visited with her in the hospital before her surgery. There she was all dressed up in her hospital gown splendor with the blue prayer shawl wrapped around her shoulders. We prayed together again. When the nurse came to take her to surgery, she took the prayer shawl off, kissed it and handed it to the nurse. She said, "This is my prayer shawl. My church is praying for me. I am going to be just fine."

There is more going on here than meets the eye. Jesus is here to give us the water that will well up within us and become a life-giving stream. The church is not stone. It is a stream of living water.