

The Second Sunday after Epiphany
St. John 4:5-14

Prayer: We give thanks, O God our Father, for the good work You have begun in us, that You have called us to faith in Jesus and the knowledge of Your love in Him. We pray that You would continue this work in our lives, that leading us to a greater appreciation of the message that our sins are forgiven our faith might be strengthened and our love for you and those around us may abound more and more to Your praise and glory, Amen.

In the Name of the One who gives every good and perfect gift, dear fellow redeemed;

What is often missed when we read this account of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman is that in the beginning there is very little about it that is pious. Hearing it read in church or learning the story in Sunday School or in a Bible History class in our elementary school we often get the impression that the Samaritan woman is without guile, that she is being honest in all her questions. Jesus asks for a drink, she is shocked and innocently asks Him why He would do this. He mentions the Living Water; she naively asks how He intends to get water from the well when He has no equipment for this. Jesus says that He will give this Living Water; and if you read the verse following our text she asks, "*Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water*" still imagining that Jesus is talking about the liquid stuff in the well. We tend to imagine that the woman at the well could be a Disney princess, when in reality she is more like a Disney starlet gone bad. Far from innocent and naïve; she is a worldly woman with five marriages behind her, and not content to mock God's institution of marriage through repeated divorce, now mocks it by living with a man outside of marriage.

And it is important for us to understand this because it helps us understand her side of the conversation. Her questions are not honest inquiries about what Jesus has said; they are full of sarcasm and a little bitterness. This is not a straightforward conversation about spiritual matters; as far as the woman is concerned she showed up at Jacob's well to get some water, minding her own business, when this Jewish man, a man from a people who have always despised Samaritans and treated them as second-class citizens, asks her for a drink. She is not as much shocked as she is irritated. When she says, "*How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?*" she is not asking, "I am curious; would You explain why you choose to ignore our social customs of men not speaking to unmarried women and of Jews not associating with Samaritans?" She is saying, "You have a lot of nerve asking me to do You a favor." And when Jesus then suggests that He is One who could offer her Living Water, she is not confused, wondering how He intends to get water from the well without a bucket, her reply is essentially, "Yeah, right. Mister, you picked the wrong lost soul to try and

save," almost certainly wondering how much longer it's going to take to fill her jars so she can get away from this nut and go home.

The irony is that this insight into the text actually makes it more common, because after all, how often isn't this the reaction people have to Jesus? In all times and in all places Jesus speaks those words, "*If you knew the gift of God...*" only to hear, "Yeah, right. Believe in Jesus and I'm going to feel so much better. Believe in Jesus and all my problems are going to disappear. No thanks; I got better things to do with my time than listen to you talk about your imaginary living water." More often than not, the good news of how Jesus died for us and brings us forgiveness for our sins is rejected as being imaginary, a fairy-tale, something too good to be true, or if it is true, something really intended to make good people better, not make sinners into good people. Treated with sarcasm, not with seriousness.

And we shake our heads and think to ourselves what an unfortunate thing this is, until we deal with sin in our lives, find ourselves struggling with temptation and guilt, with the knowledge that we are as not as innocent or as pious as we would like to think; indeed we are rather worldly, even sinful. Even worse, we are just as reluctant to

Know the Gift of God

and listen to the One who would give us Living Water. Because we have made our own mockeries of marriage by using pornography, having sex outside of marriage, and by seeing marriage as a way to get what I want from my spouse, rather than as an opportunity to serve this person whom I am to love above all others. We make a mockery of God's commandments as we talk back to our parents, say hurtful things to other people, and eagerly hear and spread gossip. It doesn't take much for us to realize that we have not been the son or daughter we should be, or the parent we should be, or the friend we should be. And then Jesus comes and sits down next to us and says, "*If you knew the gift of God...you would ask of Him and He would give you the Living Water.*"

And very often our first reaction is to look at Him and say, "You don't seem to have much, Jesus. You're offering me some water poured on my head, some nice sounding words and a taste of bread and wine. But my problems are deep and complex. So it's nice that You want to help, but maybe the best way You can help right now is by leaving me alone and letting me sort this out on my own."

And so we stop coming to church; stop hearing the word of God, stop taking communion. Our brilliant solution to sin, even as Christians, is to try and get as far away as possible from Jesus, thinking that given enough time, we will either somehow make up for it, or it will go away, and then we will come back to church and hear what Jesus has to say, because then it will apply to me, too, because then I won't be as much, or at least feel as much, of a sinner. We are often as bad as the children of the world; we don't really want the gift of God. We want to feel as if we have earned our

place with God; that God has not really given us anything, except maybe a little inspiration and a nudge in the right direction.

But looking to our own wells and drawing our own water is never going to satisfy our thirst for righteousness. *“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,”* because we can never satisfy God’s demand of perfection. We are good at covering up sin, explaining the reasons for sin, giving excuses for sin, but we cannot eliminate sin, because everything we do is tainted with sin. And so when we turn to ourselves or any other human effort to deal with sin, it’s like trying to satisfy our thirst with salt water; it seems to fill us up for a while and satisfy us but in the end it only leaves us more thirsty. We need pure water. We need the Living Water.

And so Jesus comes and sits at our well again, sits down next to us and says, *“If you knew the gift of God, ... you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water”* (St John 4:10). You see, Jesus does not come to us and offer us forgiveness and eternal life because we are good enough to drink it, or because we have worked so hard to earn it, or because we proved to Him that we are worthy of His gift; He comes to us and offers us His forgiveness because we need it. He engaged the Samaritan woman in conversation about living water, about forgiveness and her need for a savior because she was a sinner, and He comes to you and to me and says to us that He would have us know the gift of God, because we are sinners and we need His forgiveness just as much. Our guilt and our feelings of unworthiness often make us feel as if we are unworthy of the gift of God and so therefore should stay away from the places where we find it; but the truth is that our guilt just shows us how qualified we are to receive it. When the Pharisees once complained who Jesus spent time with sinners, He replied, *“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners”* (St. Mark 2:17). To realize that we are sinners is to realize that Jesus came for us; to call us to repentance and to satisfy our thirst for righteousness with the living water of the forgiveness of our sins, the water that is a fountain springing up to eternal life.

It often happens that when we look at our lives it seems as though there is little that is pious or spiritual about it. What’s even worse is that as we work to improve ourselves, become more spiritual we so often feel as if we are making no progress or worse, going backwards. Jesus would remind us that our piety, our holiness is not something measured by our feelings, or by charting our good deeds. It is measured on the cross. Our lives will never be free of sin; we will always be struggling with temptation and struggling with guilt for the times we have made a mockery of God’s commandments. And so as Christians, we look to the cross, because every time we do we see the savior who died for us and so we see our holiness on display. We bring our children to Baptism, because there we see holiness poured over them. We come to church, because in this place we stand together to hear our holiness being declared, and kneel to have it placed into our very mouths. We come to renew our contact with Jesus, who is our righteousness, our holiness, our redemption. Like the Samaritan

woman we may struggle with our sin and at times even with our rejection of Jesus and His forgiveness, but also like her we put our faith in Him and know Him as the Christ, the Savior of the world.

Gloria Patri...

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