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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Third Sunday in Lent
March 12, 2023

Lectionary Year A: John 4:5-42

If you've ever worked as a server in a restaurant or lounge, you would know what that initial encounter with a customer is like and how it goes. Speaking personally, the only times I've done this kind of work were in familiar environments and mostly with people I knew, so I suppose some of the awkwardness associated with "cold calls" on strangers was avoided. But the routine was simple. The person was seated and I took his or her drink order.

And, if anything, this remains one of the most basic gestures of hospitality regardless of where one might be -- a restaurant, lounge, private residence, office, or wherever...

For me, even familiar surroundings didn't always guarantee familiar faces, though. It was still my bounden duty as a server, however, to extend the same gesture of hospitality to the stranger, too. Sometimes the demand would be up front even before the offer was extended. And then there were customers whose routines were so unchanging that you knew what they were having before they sat down. But, as sure as a day is twenty-four hours, this little exchange remains as basic of a human interaction as one can find -- regardless of whether the server is offering or the customer is demanding.

Jesus approaches the Samaritan woman in our Gospel text similarly; his request is simple: "Give me a drink" (John 4:7b). He is thirsty and tired, which, if anything, should remind us that he still was fully human along with being fully divine. But more importantly yet, we see how this little exchange initiates a sig-

nificant conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman...but not without the icebreaker, "Give me a drink."

As anyone who has waited tables or tended bar knows, that initial exchange is usually the jumping-off point to some more meaningful conversation. And if the people you're waiting on don't have much to say, it's often because they're quiet and reserved to begin with. And to use another example, there are reasons why places of business have coffee pots and water coolers beyond those that are obvious; more than anything, they encourage engagement and interaction that would otherwise be stifled by people simply staying in their silos. The well in this morning's Gospel text, I believe, serves many of these same purposes beyond those of, for example, quenching thirst.

And as Jesus points out, the nature of water will change because of his presence. Yes, there will continue to be the water we drink in order to quench our temporal thirst, but, of course, after drinking this water, we'll get thirsty again (John 4:13). So Jesus speaks of another water; he says, "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14b). This image of "living water" is one that ultimately belongs to Christ himself; Christ, then, is the only One who can satisfy our eternal thirst for God's love, salvation, and life everlasting.

Having been around bodies of water for most of my life, and much of it being close to (or on) the lakes of northern Minnesota, I've had many opportunities to ponder water-related imagery. In the North Country, one of the worst things to have around is standing, stagnant water. About the only life that comes from this kind of water is that of mosquitoes. I suppose if you consider disgusting, green algae to be "life," there would be that, too. Residents of those parts are

even urged to clean up old tires and discarded wading pools -- along with anything else that could collect water -- as a way of lessening the nuisance and disease-spreading potential of Minnesota's "state bird." So needless to say, the associations that I have with standing, stagnant water are overwhelmingly negative...no doubt due to the hazards associated with it.

While water is, indeed, a source of life, it doesn't do much good if it sits in old tires or discarded wading pools; it needs instead to gush freely from a spring or flow down a stream if it is to be of benefit to things other than mosquitoes and algae. And yes, I have seen this kind of living water where my Dad used to fish and catch minnows for bait, and I have looked down and seen the schools swimming and looked across and seen the ducks paddling, and I have heard the loons make their plaintive call across the water. Now, doesn't that seem a little bit more like "life" than the standing, stagnant water I mentioned earlier?

For as limited as our imaginations are, language of "living water" -- and perhaps a few glimpses of the lakes of northern Minnesota -- is about the most we can comprehend of Christ's gift of living water to us. And, like the Samaritan woman, we may be outcast and calling to Christ, as well: "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty..." (John 4:15b). But, despite our limitations, we can also imagine -- albeit incompletely -- the infinite life, grace, and mercy that flows from Christ himself. For someone like me, this would be better-than-Minnesota-lake "good." This would be "good" as God would have it!

God still did a pretty decent job on those lakes, though...

And Jesus chose to engage with someone who was despised by his own people -- a Samaritan woman -- but this grew into something much greater. Just as water,

through Jesus, became something more than that which quenches thirst, so too did the Samaritan woman become someone much greater than an outcast peasant -- she was among the first to proclaim the Messiah, albeit tentatively: "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" (John 4:29b). Regardless, it remains certain that, if one so desires the transformation of heart, mind, and soul through a relationship with the Divine, the invitation of Christ to experience precisely that is here. It is here, in the living water of Holy Baptism, where Christ claims us as his own unto eternal life. It is here, in the Bread of Life and Cup of Salvation that nourishes and strengthens us through the forgiveness of sins and by drawing us closer to Christ. It is here, in the proclamation of the Messiah from the time of the Samaritan woman on down through the centuries by preachers and teachers inspired by the Holy Spirit.

As far as I can tell from this morning's Gospel text, it all started with Jesus' own request: "Give me a drink." Think about that next time you're standing next to the coffee pot or the water cooler or, if you're a server in a restaurant, you go to take someone's order. Christ could come to you -- or someone else -- in just such an encounter.

Amen.