

I don't think I've ever been as thirsty as the summer day when I was 11 and attending choir camp. You heard me right, choir camp. I was in a co-ed children's choir in Atlanta and we had a week-long camp in the summer to jumpstart learning the music for the upcoming season. It was held at a typical summer camp location and in between training sessions, we did typical summer camp type activities: arts and crafts, swimming in a lake, sports, etc. This would have taken place in August ... in Georgia ... when the midday temps would have been well into the 90's, with high humidity. This was also the early 1980's when there weren't a whole lot of precautions taken for young people doing activities in the heat.

On that particular day, I was playing soccer. The way I remember it, the field was on a hill up above the lake. We had been playing for a good long time, we were all super sweaty, and there were no water jugs or bottles around. I remember being so thirsty I asked somebody for gum to chew just so I could get some saliva in my mouth. I wasn't about to leave the game, because we needed to win it to make the championship later in the day, and I was one of the more athletic singers in the group.

Well, the gum didn't do the trick; in fact, all it did was make me more thirsty. As soon as time was up, I ran straight off the field, down the hill, and with my clothes and sneakers still on dove headlong into the lake, taking in as much of that lake water as I could until my thirst was quenched. Yeah...lake water...ick. But it was refreshing. I was so thirsty I was willing to do anything to get water into my mouth.

I wonder if any of you have similar stories of being so thirsty you would do anything for a gulp of water?

I suspect it was that type of desperation, but from a spiritual and emotional aspect, that allowed the woman Jesus encountered at the well to be open to the conversation.

Let me begin with a comparison of two words: desperation and despair. Despair and desperation are closely related but describe different emotional states.

Despair is the loss of hope. It is an inward condition in which a person believes that nothing will improve and that help is not coming. Despair tends to be quiet, heavy, and immobilizing.

Desperation is the urgent response to a crisis when options feel exhausted.

A desperate person may still hope for relief but feels driven to act because the situation is unbearable.

During that soccer game, I was desperate for water. The Israelites in the wilderness without water are in despair – there's no hope that God will alleviate their predicament and so they quarrel against Moses and test God's presence.

Jesus will encounter people who are both in despair and those who are desperate. Today's story is one where Jesus meets a woman in a desperate situation. The biggest clue is John's mention that she is coming to the well at noon - in the hotter portion of the day. For most women, the chore of gathering the day's water would have happened before the sun came up, and it would have been a social activity. John is signaling to the reader that there is something going on in this woman's life that would cause her to do her water-gathering at

mid-day, alone. Also, because John is so full of symbolism, this story is set in distinct contrast to the story we discussed last week – one that happened in the chapter just before this – where the Pharisee, Nicodemus, schedules a visit with Jesus in the night. The Pharisee, in his privilege, chose his initial meeting with Jesus on his own preference and schedule under the cover of darkness. He would remain “in the dark” until a climactic moment much later in the gospel.

This woman had no choice – Jesus elected to meet her where they could talk openly but also privately. And the fact that the encounter occurred at a well makes for a happy and convenient metaphor! Perhaps it is also a symbolic signal that since they meet in the brightness of midday, enlightenment will occur?!

While their privacy allows for Jesus to illustrate that he is a prophet and knows more about this woman than she may be willing to let on, it also puts them both in a dangerous and vulnerable situation. Cultural customs would NEVER have allowed for a woman and a man to meet in such a way. Religious customs would have layered on top of it the fact that he is Jewish and she is Samaritan. Nope, nope, nope. It was scandalous. And yet, the work that Jesus has to do far exceeds the limitations of cultural norms and expectations.

They put all these cultural issues on the table in their initial conversation. Then Jesus gets to the heart of the matter by sharing that those “who drink of this (well) water will be thirsty again, 14 but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” She’s intrigued, but doesn’t yet fully grasp what Jesus is offering her, for she asks for Jesus to “give me that living

water so I won't have to come back to this well." Oh so close ... but, it's not about *that well*.

Jesus then taps back into her personal life by mentioning the five husbands that the woman has previously had and the fact that the one she's currently living with isn't her husband. This disclosure focuses her attention. She sees he is a prophet, and even claims that she is waiting for the coming of the Messiah. This is why she was such a good target for Jesus. Despite a life that has been difficult – perhaps even having dealt her a bad hand (there are several explanations for why she's had five husbands plus a housemate) – she is still open to the possibility of the Messiah coming. She may be desperate, but she is not in despair.

When she says, "When the Christ comes, the Messiah will proclaim all things to us," Jesus knows she is ready for the truth. "I AM he," he tells her. With that response, everything opens up in her – the living water begins to pour into her soul.

You all must know that the proclamation "I AM" is a direct connection to the "name" the Holy One gave to Moses at the bush that was burning but wasn't consumed. (Exodus 3)

13 But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is this name?' what shall I say to them?" **14** God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM."
(The Holy One) said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.' "

Hebrew uses the four letter YHWH to spell the Holy Name. Jews observe that the name is too holy to pronounce; such that they use the stand in *Adonai*. NO ONE

pronounces the name. But on that occasion, Jesus unabashedly did, and the woman immediately knows who he was.

Remember that **desperation is the urgent response to a crisis when options feel exhausted**. Well, the crisis of the woman has now met the One who will not only quench her spiritual thirst, but will keep her reservoirs filled with “a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” That type of encounter also requires an “urgent response.” So right then, the woman drops her jar on the ground and goes running back to her village to tell her people to “Come and see (the One) who told me everything I have ever done!”

It would be easy to say that she was so overcome by the moment that she dropped her water jar in her haste to share the encounter. But John being John, the action is rife with symbolism. In fact, she may retrieve her water jar to continue dealing with her bodily thirst. But in this moment *she has become the vessel* containing the water of life filled, in Jesus’ words, “with spirit and truth.” And SHE – this Samaritan Woman becomes the first Apostle of the Good news!!! Yes, the living of her days will cause her body to crave moisture and refreshment. But from then on, no matter what life throws at her, her spirit will be filled with the TRUTH that the one who made the heavens and the earth knows her inside and out and has proclaimed that she is beloved and whole.

Oh, how our world is thirsting for such knowledge!

I’m currently reading the book *My Friends* by Fredrik Backman in preparation for our church book group. It’s the story of four pre-teens who each have high

dysfunction in their families – some encounter destructive abuse. It's a tale of the damage that type of formative environment can have on human development – outside and in. The goal for the group is for one of them to “get out” through his artwork. Something gives them the courage to act out of desperation instead of sinking into despair. A generation later, their story will affect the life of a young woman who grew up in a series of foster homes, who clung onto hope because of the painting created by the young artist. In them, she finds “her people,” and her reason for living.

Spirit and truth, bound up in a community of those who believe in you, can be the same as a spring gushing forth with living water.

So, the woman Jesus met shared her encounter with her people. Because of her testimony they wanted to learn more, and believe for themselves ... or, is it, to truly believe *in themselves*? Jesus' disciples, who were predisposed to hold contempt for and disgust of Samaritans, weren't too pleased to be given the opportunity to share what they had gleaned from Jesus. And yet there they all were - vessels of living water sharing it with those whose vases were empty. Community was formed despite a desperate situation – it's almost as if Jesus planned it that way!

This is the nature of our calling – to be filled and to share. For life to empty us, and require us to return again to the community to be filled once more. Look around friends. Yes, look in the mirror, but also look around you – all around you - here, there, everywhere and see amongst you the thirsty and the sated - and share. Share in the abundance of life that Jesus has to offer us - for the world is full of it!

I'll close with a poem that I formed into word pictures. The poem is by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer, and it is called "When I Prayed for Proof of Good in the World."

It's as if I'm a vase, I thought,
As two musicians
poured all that
hard-won beauty
into me, and
holding it
felt such
gratefulness,

then stunned by how truly
I long to pour all that same beauty
my prayer transformed: into
please let me be you
a pitcher.