

Giving Us Living Water Lenten evening reflection Divine Savior Parish Wednesday,
March 29, 2017 7:00 PM **The Woman at the Well Jn 4:5-42** (Do I thirst?)

I want to put the story of the Samaritan Woman in the proper context. The context is chapter 4 of the Gospel according to John. Now **the Gospel according to John is very symbolic**; it is not meant to be read literally. One might say that of all Scripture, but in particular the Gospel of John. For example, in chapter 2 he has Jesus cleansing the Temple, and he has it two more times. Does that mean Jesus did it three times? No, it means it's really important; you better look at this. That's what we mean by symbolism; **he repeats things that are really important**. It is very important to remember that before he talks to the Samaritan woman, **he has already gone to the Temple and cleansed it of the animal sacrifices**. We see also that before he talks to the Samaritan woman, he has talked to Nicodemus, who has come to him in the night and asked him questions. And **he tells Nicodemus that the only way anyone could enter into the kingdom of God is through some kind of rebirth by water and Spirit. So this is opening up a new dimension of human experience. This has already happened before Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman**. And then John the Baptist is arrested and taken out of the picture. And then Jesus' ministry starts growing and growing and the Pharisees note that **he is making more disciples than John the Baptist** or the disciples of John the Baptist, and baptizing more, although he didn't actually baptize people, but his disciples did. **So this is the setting; this is the beginning**.

So we are talking about a very symbolic gospel. The first thing we notice we are talking about a Samaritan woman. Now **a Samaritan woman is the opposite of**—what? **Jewish elders**. Judaism was a religion of men. Technically, I don't mean this to insult anyone, but technically women weren't part of the Jewish community. They weren't circumcised. That's how you got to become a member of the Jewish community. So Judaism was all about the power of men and the rule of the patriarchs, and a Samaritan woman is the opposite. She is not really Jewish, although she is related to Jews, but she is not Jewish and she is not male. Jesus, through the eyes of the evangelist, is trying to get people to see things. Jesus now is going to have **this dialogue. It is going to speak of Jesus' own mission and what he is all about**.

Now the very idea of the well, the woman at the well, **the well is already a symbol of Baptism and of therefore the new life** that he told Nicodemus in an earlier chapter was **necessary in order to live eternally**.

Now some people accuse John the evangelist of being a dualist, meaning seeing things in black and white terms. He does contrast things: life from above, life from below. That is a contrast. **Life from below means basically the life of the biological world**, the world where animals and plants and so on come about in a natural way; that's life from below. That isn't leading anywhere. **He says life from above is God, and that's what he has come to share with people**. I don't believe that he intends these two different aspects of life to be separated, but he is rather pointing out that they are not exactly the same thing, but **they are to be brought together in the human person made in the image and likeness of God**. And he now, Jesus, is God, fully God, but coming to dwell in our human nature, thus enabling us to become, actually, God.

Now that may not set well in your ears, but that is the way he thought, and so did many of the evangelists and even the theologians like Thomas Aquinas. He said, **“God became man so that man could become God.”** We don’t usually use that type of expression, but if you think about it, eternal life, if you believe in eternal life, and you believe **we are capable of taking on eternal life, that is what God is, eternal.** So we share in God, God’s power, God’s life, God’s being, everything. And **it starts even now,** and that’s the whole point. Even in **Baptism** we are supposed to be **tasting something of the eternal and sensing something that goes beyond the senses, that is, the intuitions of the soul.** And we do have these experiences. **The more quiet we can be, the more we allow this to take place within us.** The more we run around in circles, the less we are making ourselves available to these deep consolations of the Spirit. So this is already—the well is there. The well represents the water of Baptism, the womb of new life.

And so **he says to her, “Give me a drink.”** Now you will immediately, I hope you immediately think about the story in Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus says at the end of time the Son of Man will gather everyone together in the final judgment. “He will say to the blessed, ‘I was thirsty and you gave me drink,’ and to the wicked, ‘I was thirsty and you gave me nothing.’” So here he is **giving her an opportunity to become righteous.** We become righteous by serving God. And he is saying, okay, I am thirsty, now “Give me a drink.” So we live out in our own lives, in our own actions, in our own good works, we live out this opportunity to be righteous, **to see God in the needs of others and to serve them, to serve that need:** to visit the imprisoned, to feed the hungry, all those things in which we acknowledge God’s presence in human need. So here Jesus is now showing himself the Son of God, but in need because he was thirsty and as human **he had all the needs we do**—all of them. He felt pain and hunger and thirst and every kind of need: fear, anger. Everything that we experience Jesus experienced. **But he brought something to that experience, his personal knowledge of the Father.** And that’s what he always tried to share, the knowledge he had of the Father. And with his knowledge of the Father came also the power of the Spirit. So **God is really this dynamism of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit involving people,** bringing people in, sharing with people, healing, reforming, restoring, re-creating all the time. And he is doing it right now at the well with this woman, the Samaritan.

Now he says, “If you only knew who is asking for a drink, you would ask him and he would give you living water.” And that term **“living water”** was used in the Old Testament to mean two things. **It meant the Torah, but it also meant a personal experience of God.** So if you only knew who was asking you for a drink, you would ask him and he would give you an experience of God. Who doesn’t want that? We all want to experience God, and actually we do, but sometimes we don’t know we are experiencing God. We don’t know how to name it, and we can actually overlook it. **So it’s important that we stay there at the well for a few minutes and try to drink in what is happening here.**

So we have to ask ourselves in this Lent, **Do I really thirst for this, what Jesus is offering?** I think it is possible for us to become awfully satisfied. We have a pretty good life, physically anyway. We have a pretty good income, comfortable homes. **We could become pretty satisfied and stop thirsting for something more.** But that would be a mistake because the things that satisfy us on the way, those all pass away, so the passing things of life, and even people. **People are important and our relationship with them is the way in which God touches us, and yet people also pass away.** We all pass away. We are moving in and out. What’s important is that we let what is impassable, what is eternal touch us. So we ask the

question: Do I thirst? **Do I want an experience of God or am I content with less?** The problem is not that people want too much in life. The real problem is they don't want enough. They set their sights too low. And then **when they recognize that what they have set their sights on doesn't satisfy, they want more of that. But that's not fulfilling.**

What we need to do is change our diet, start to want something different, starting to want some change. That sort of desire is **what Jesus is trying to awaken in the Samaritan woman, the desire to change because our habits are very powerful** things, our emotional habits, our mental habits, the way we think, the way we act, the way we react. People sometimes *and* say, "You know Father, I hate to say it, but I always have the same sins." Oh, I wonder why? Because of the reality of habit. **We get in a particular habit.** This is how we always deal with our problems. And **if we are wounded in childhood, we develop very bad habits very early on.** And sometimes we become very distrusting people, and then we need a lot of extra help. But again, it is God who comes to us. **We don't have to go to God; God comes to us.** He is always coming to us. He is always wanting us.

The woman characteristically misunderstands. She says to him—and this is typical of John's Gospel, misunderstandings always take place, **wordplay** and word misunderstanding. So she says, "What do you mean? **You don't even have a bucket.**" I'm sure John wanted his audience to laugh at that—"you don't even have a bucket," because they know already he is not talking about that kind of water, and therefore there is no need for a bucket.

By the way, the word "bucket" is very popular today and it was a book and a movie, *The Bucket List*. Maybe you saw that. I don't really want to hurt anyone's feelings, but I really think the **bucket list is an example of a great misunderstanding of life.** Life is not about what we can get out of it. **Life is not about piling up all the experiences that we can, seeing all the great places we can go see.** It's nice if you can do this. That's not the purpose of life. If we are really looking at our eventual death, if we are really going to soberly think about it, we should not be making a list of things we have to do or places we have to see before we die. **What we should be doing is making a list of what gifts we can bring to God before we leave for home.** What gifts can we give to God before we go home? Now that would be a really good bucket list, but that's not usually what people mean when they talk about their bucket list, the things they could really do for God.

This dialogue starts to talk about these **three issues that are so common to all people,** even if they deny it, even if they say they are atheists, but still there are these issues of **faith, worship and religion.** Now I say even if people say they are atheists because atheists have developed a kind of faith and they think that, for example, the universe just happened, in which case they are really saying the universe must be divine. And that's not exactly coherent. There is always tremendous mystery in life that even an atheist cannot explain. So in a way we are cheating when we say, well, God made everything. This is true. It's absolutely true. It's not an explanation because **everything involves mystery, and we can't explain it;** that's the point. We cannot explain anything, and we are involved in what we cannot explain and that whatever it is, **whoever it is, has created everything, is trying to involve us in this same mystery and wants us to be trusting, which is what faith is about, and wants us to look beyond, which is what hope is about, and wants us to recognize our own goodness, which is where love begins.**

That's why the commandment of Leviticus is "Love your neighbor as yourself." You have to see how lovable you are in the sight of God so that you will then have this tremendous motivation to love others. **No one loves others who isn't loved in the first place.** Most of the people you know who are really loving people have come from loving families, or they didn't come from loving families, but they somehow got involved somehow with loving people, a community of believers or whatever. **Love begets love, but without love you don't have love.**

And of course the whole point of the gospel is: **"In the beginning was the Word; apart from the Word nothing came to be."** The Word is the Word of love. So we say that God is that which must be and cannot not be. That's theology. I know it's a little difficult. God is that which cannot not be. Maybe a little bit complicated, but not really if you think about it. God must be. **God must be. But if God is love, then love must be. If God is truth, truth must be.** These are realities bigger than we are, way bigger than we are, and actually have created us and are bringing us along on this great journey. So this mystery is inviting us to be trusting and to be accepting and to start to see; **in John faith is often, almost always, involving seeing God at work in Jesus.** Hoping—hoping means what? In the promises of God. **This world is made for something; it didn't just happen.** People who think that everything just happens and still works, they really believe a lot. But what the word of God says is everything is here for a reason so the glory of God be manifest and we are on the way toward that.

Now the **Samaritans and the Jews shared the Torah**, that is, the first five books in the Old Testament, the Torah. And in that Torah there are over six hundred laws, so some people call it the Law. Now the Jews added to that in the way they developed their thinking and so on. The Pharisees, the scribes, the rabbis developed more laws which later was called the Halakah and it was part of something bigger called the **Talmud. Now Christians don't pay any attention to this and the Samaritans didn't either, and for this reason they were at odds with the Jews.**

But not only that, the Samaritans and the Jews **did not have the same temple.** Now I just said Jesus cleaned out the Temple in Jerusalem in John's Gospel prior to this. So what's going on? So now she brings up, well, **where shall we worship?** You, you guys in **Jerusalem** and we worship here on **Mt. Gerizim.** Well, what do you say? Which is better? And Jesus says, **"Amen, amen, I say to you, a time is coming when a person will worship God not in Jerusalem and not on Mt. Gerizim but in Spirit and truth."**

Now this is very important, this is really almost central to the whole story, that **Jesus is trying to move her along into a very new and unexplored area.** Jerusalem, or sometimes called Zion, was capital of the kingdom of Judah, which had been taken over by the Romans and was now Judea. But Jerusalem was not the capital of Judea. The capital of Judea was Caesarea, but Jerusalem was the religious capital. Originally there were, as you probably know, twelve tribes of Israel. The Jews were one tribe, the tribe of Judah. It was a tribe in the south, which is also a raised mountainous area, very poor, and they remained until the time of Christ. But **in the north the tribes** were often attacked, disseminated, pulled away, deported, brought back, **intermarried with the gentiles; these were the Samaritans.** So people that believed in purity of ethnic stock **would not accept Samaritans as relatives. They regarded them as spoiled,** you might say. So probably, and I don't know this for a fact, but I imagine the Samaritans

thought that often the Jews were maybe stuck up because they had this attitude, **this attitude of, well, we are the chosen and you are not.**

Now Jesus cuts through all this, **all this idea of identity: tribal identity, ethnic identity**—I'm a Catholic, she is a Methodist. My father was brought up Catholic; my mother was brought up Methodist. When my father wanted to marry my mother my grandfather opposed it, tried to stop it. The pastor tried to stop it, "Oh she is a Protestant." Now that was 1940 something, but the attitude doesn't necessarily go away, even though we get along better, but the idea of who we are is deep. This is saying we are not Catholics or Methodists or Jews or Samaritans. **We are supposed to be children of God and we are supposed to learn how to worship in Spirit and truth.** So the gospel is suggesting that any category that sets us apart cannot be basic to our identity. **What makes us who we are is what brings us together, not what sets us apart.** The people of our country, **America, today need to hear that very clearly.** Too many people think that what makes them special or what gives them identity is something very narrow, some ethnic, racial, linguistic identity. It is not.

Now sadly, in the history of the Church, in Christianity, even Catholicism, which is a very big, universal religion, but nonetheless even that can become tribal. It didn't start out that way, but it can become it. When I grew up people said, "Well, of course she is Catholic; she is from Ireland." That wasn't really true either there were Protestants in Northern Ireland. Or, "Well of course he is Catholic; he is from Poland." That type of identity, that sort of ethnic identity, that is not what Christ was about. **What Christ was and is about is a new relationship with God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bringing us into that, bringing us this divine life** that to our ears may sound odd.

So faith in this gospel is a kind of knowledge that is really an insight into the reality disclosed in Jesus. She, the Samaritan woman, **comes to faith** because she starts to recognize that Jesus is not just an ordinary guy standing there talking with her. She says, **"I recognize you are a prophet."** Well, that's coming to faith because a prophet is one who speaks for God. It may not be the theology we later used to talk about Jesus as a prophet, but it is for her coming to faith.

So worship in Spirit and truth is the worship that Jesus himself offers. He is the one who worships in Spirit and truth. He is the fulfillment of the Torah. The Samaritan woman has to struggle now to understand who Jesus is, but then this makes her struggle to wonder who she is. **And the way he talks with her, she starts to have a whole new understanding of who she is.**

Now **the gift of Jesus to the Father is brought to fulfillment on the Cross,** and this relates directly to the cleansing of the Temple. Jesus kicks out all the animals and birds because that isn't good enough for the Father. **What the Father wants is his own love and worship and life, and he is willing to give it.** And that's fulfilling the Torah, and **that's bringing worship in Spirit and truth to earth.** And the whole idea that we have in our Church **in the Eucharist** is that **we are invited into that worship in Spirit and truth.** It is Christ himself who offers himself to the Father who is on our altar tables, the very same Christ. The very blood he poured out on the Cross is on our altar table in the chalice. And this enables us to be brought into this worship in Spirit and truth, to transcend, literally **go beyond our limits as mere human beings** and enter into a new phase of God's purpose. We call it Communion. **What does Communion**

mean? Union with God and one another, which is real and in a way more real than anything we can see or touch or taste. Even in the act of eating Eucharist and drinking from the chalice, **we don't actually experience God**. We taste bread and we taste wine, but **it is through our recognition of what God is doing in Christ that we see, know, not bread and wine, the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ**, who has come to this earth to bring us into God. We become what we eat. But eating the bread from heaven and drinking from the chalice means that **we offer our lives too with Jesus, and we give our lives, as an offering in Spirit and truth**. As St. Augustine said, the "whole Christ" meaning all of us offers the "whole Christ" to the Father. This is the meaning of our Mass. But **it has to be done consciously, deliberately, intentionally. It can't be done mechanically**. If we just come and go through motions, we will not benefit richly as really God want us to, as God has made it possible for us to.

So Jesus now is the true temple and he is the true sacrifice and the true high priest and the true Messiah and even said so in so many words to this woman: "I am he." And the term "I AM" is of course exactly what Moses heard when he saw the burning bush, when he said, well, who are you? I AM who AM, *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, I AM who AM. The same thing Jesus says to the woman: "I am," a revelation, a disclosure of Jesus' own real reality.

So unfortunately the beautiful ritual of our Mass can become just another rite of tribal, ethnic, cultural identity, and we just engage in it in a sort of mindless, mechanical way. **The Eucharist really requires us to awaken to God's presence and to the great invitation that God extends to all living things to enter into communion**. That is what he is doing at the well with this woman, he is doing with us just as well. Entering into communion must be done consciously, as I mentioned, deliberately, just as now the Samaritan woman is consciously pondering: what is he talking about? And if you think it's a little bit hard, it's okay. **It's okay to ponder. It's okay to wonder about things**.

So what happens; what is the result of all this? Well, she is so overwhelmed by this encounter that **she shares what happened in town**, and all the people come out, and they want to meet Jesus. Now **that is exactly what we are called to be like this woman going out and explaining to people, sharing with people our excitement about meeting God**, which we do. And then it says, "They invited him to stay with them." They invited him to stay with them. That is **our goal, to help others invite God to stay with them**. If we can do that with one person, two people, three people, gradually it would make a **tremendous impact on the world. The world is saved one person at a time**. And no matter how you might feel that you can't do certain things, **there are things you can do**. And when you find those things you will know God in a new way that will lift you up, **that will make you feel really different and new**. And that's why very often the term is used "reborn" because in a way you really will be a new person.

So now in conclusion I have a few questions for you to ponder. I thought maybe you would like to spend a few minutes in meditation before leaving, but it's up to you. So here are the questions.

- **Do I thirst?**
- **Do I realize who is asking me for a drink?**

- **Am I willing to bring my life to God through Christ and make it an offering?**
- **Does the Mass leave me with a sense of communion with one who knows me and everything I have done, and yet who accepts me anyway without condition?**