

“Shaped Through Thirst”

Imagine that you have a brother who grew up with you in the church. He was on the same Bible quizzing team, went to camp and youth group, and were baptized the same day as you. In fact, it was a very special experience because your parents, grandparents and entire family were there. You received matching Bibles as gifts and began highlighting in them and sharing important and special passages with each other. As you grew older you decided to go to different colleges; you went to a private Christian college, and your brother went to a public state school. You were still very close, and you even still talked with each other about your faith. College was challenging for you, but because of the Christian foundation of the school you were able to meet with professors and the campus chaplain to talk about your struggles and were supported by faith in Christ. Your brother, on the other hand, did not have that same support system as you. In fact, everything around him seemed to tell him that the God he loved so much wasn't real; or that He was an evil wrathful God who hated gay people and democrats. Your brother tried to fight against those opinions, but they were so powerful and the people talking about them were his professors, friends, and even his roommate. Then he met someone. Someone that he was sure was the one; they were going to get married, raise a family, and spend the rest of their lives together. And his fiancée was really nice, a great person really. She gave a lot of money to charities and was part of a community group for civil rights. But she wasn't Christian. In fact, she was a very vocal atheist. But your brother decided that she was worth the risk. After all, he was strong enough in his faith. As time went by, you and your brother started talking less and less about your faith. Soon it wasn't coming up at all. You found out that after a few months of marriage, your brother stopped going to church. When he and his wife had children, they didn't bring them to church, not even VBS. When you asked your brother about it, he said that he was too busy to go, especially now that sports were on Sundays. Besides, he still read the Bible occasionally, and he definitely prayed every couple of days. And after all, isn't it more important that children get socialized through sports than they get religionized. Your brother started taking Tai Chi classes and getting in touch with his inner zen. He began reading books on Buddhism and Taoism and watching a lot of Oprah. He still believed in God, but he also believed in being a good, centered person, and he thought that karma had an awful lot to do with life as well. You didn't know what to do; you were upset with how your brother's life was going, but you weren't sure how to be involved. One day, you decided to ask him if he had that old Bible laying around still, the one you used to highlight in and talk about. He said yes, but he told you that he had made some changes to it. He said that he didn't really like the God of the Old Testament; that god was too wrathful and unjust. So he ripped out the Old Testament. He also informed you that miracles don't exist; they were just metaphors and really unnecessary to knowing Jesus, so he scribbled out those passages. And he especially didn't think that Jesus was the only way to heaven, so he crossed those out too. This all made you incredibly depressed, but what could you do. A few years later, your father died, and your brother offered to give a meditation at the funeral about your dad's faith. What were you supposed to do? How could you let your brother, who had fallen so far away from the Christianity he originally believed, speak at your father's funeral about faith?

In the drama and Scripture for today, Jesus encountered a Samaritan woman while traveling north from Judea to Galilee. Now to us, this doesn't seem like a big deal. What does it matter that she is a

Samaritan? But to the Jewish community at the time, and remember that Jesus is a Jew, it meant an awful lot. You see, the relationship between the Jews and Samaritans was an awful lot like the one I just described. Because at one time, Jews and Samaritans were part of the same family and shared the same beliefs.

In 722, Assyria invaded the northern kingdom of Samaria and carried away all of its Jewish inhabitants. Now, one of the strictest Jewish laws was that Jews were not to marry anyone from another nation. This wasn't because God was a racist; it was because he knew that the Jews were not strong enough to keep the purity of the religion if foreign influences were introduced, so they were forbidden to intermarry. But, when the Jews of Samaria were taken into captivity, they decided to marry foreign peoples and "lost" their essential Jewishness. All of the sudden, they weren't worshipping Yahweh alone. He was just one of a host of other gods. So, when they came back from exile and the Jews of Judah came out of exile from Babylon, there was a real problem. The Jews from the southern Kingdom had for the most part maintained their faith and did not intermarry, and they were very bitter that the Samaritans had broken these laws. So when the Samaritans offered to help the Judeans to rebuild the wall and the temple, they were rejected. So the Samaritans built their own temple on Mt. Gerazim and worshipped there. And that was the beginning of a long-standing and deeply rooted feud that continued into Jesus' ministry and existed when He spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well.

Already, then, there was an extreme divide between Jesus and that woman. Yet, Jesus proved he was willing to bridge that divide, simply by being in territory. He and his disciples were on their way to Galilee, and the quickest route to get from Judea in the south to the extreme northern part of the country was to pass through Samaritan territory. Most Jews would have gone the long way around, but Jesus intentionally travelled through that area, which shows, even before he spoke to the woman, that the Gospel he proclaimed was meant for all people.

And there was still yet another barrier between Jesus and the Samaritan. She was a woman! Rabbis at that time did not talk to women in public. It was strictly forbidden. They wouldn't even talk to their sisters or daughters or mothers. Some Pharisees were even called "the bruised and bleeding Pharisees" because if they even saw a woman in the street they would close their eyes, often running into walls.

And what's more, this Samaritan woman had certain notoriety in her town. Later in the narrative, Jesus challenges the woman by asking her to go get her husband. He knew that she had already had five husbands and that she was currently living with a man she wasn't married to. And I'm pretty sure that was well known in the area. You see, the well that she went to was outside of the town. One has to wonder, why somebody would travel a half mile out of town at midday when the sun was at its highest peak and the heat of the day was reaching its highest temperature to get water, when there was certainly at least one well *in town*.

It is clear that even John, the gospel writer, did not have a great opinion of her. He did not even give her name. Instead, she is referred to by the thing which distinguishes her from Jesus and himself: Samaritan woman. What would it be like to be so worthless that you aren't even given a name?

And so Jesus comes to rest at this well that had been dug out by Jacob, the son of Isaac son of Abraham, while his disciples went into Sychar to buy some food. In this scene we see a perfect display of Jesus' human nature. It was midday, it was hot, and he needed rest and something to drink. The well was very deep, and the only way to get water out of it was to have a bucket made out of animal skin and a long rope to lower the bucket into the well. Apparently the disciples walked off with the only bucket that they had. Way to go. Again, the temptation was there to use his powers as the son of God, to produce a bucket or raise the water level in the well, but he didn't. He was there to meet somebody.

Soon the woman appears, and Jesus asked her for a drink. And they talk.

Jesus' conversation with this woman is similar to his conversation with Nicodemus. Jesus would say something cryptic or difficult to understand, Nicodemus would take it literally and Jesus would offer corrective but not necessarily an answer. It is interesting that these two narratives are placed next to one another because Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman could not have been any more opposite of each other. He, the learned, upright, moral teacher came to visit Jesus at midnight because he could not risk being seen with Jesus during the daytime, and she, the Samaritan woman of shocking character who was most likely uneducated meets Jesus during the day without any shame. Nicodemus could not understand that Jesus was sent by God and was in fact the Son of God, but Jesus reveals to the woman that He is God by giving her the personal name of God given to Moses "I Am" in vs. 26. And while Nicodemus leaves the conversation with Jesus, not ready to believe that He is the Messiah, the woman takes this experience and shares it with those in her town.

And so, Jesus asks her for a drink, and in vs. 9 she replies, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" Remember, neither Jews nor Samaritans, men or women, would associate with each other. This conversation was scandalous.

What's so interesting in this conversation is that the woman believes that Jesus is the one asking her for something, when in truth; she is the one in need. And isn't that true for all of us; sometimes we think we're doing something good, that He needs us, when in truth we're really the one's in need.

Jesus answers the woman in vs. 10, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked Him and he would have given you living water." And there Jesus goes again, puzzling her with His answer. She must have been asking herself, what is the gift of God, who are you and why does it matter that you could give me anything, and what is this living water?

Like Nicodemus, the woman missed the spirit of Jesus' message and took his words literally. The woman replies in vs. 11-12, "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

First of all, the woman says, I notice that you don't have a rope and bucket. She was probably thinking, who is this fool that comes through the desert without any way of getting water. She then asks how he expects to get her this water. Now, the phrase "Living water" held multiple meanings for the people at the time. But a very common understanding would be of a spring of running water. The woman

thought that Jesus was claiming that he knew where this spring was, and she took offense. The patriarch of the Samaritan faith, Jacob, had to dig this well because there was no spring in that area. If he couldn't find running water, how could this stranger claim that he had found it? In her eyes, Jesus was claiming himself to be above even Jacob.

Jesus then replies, again in riddles, that "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Jesus said that he had water that would never let her thirst again. This was a Messianic claim, pointing to His role as the Christ. "They shall not hunger or thirst." (Isaiah 49:10) But the woman did not understand. Okay, sure. The woman was skeptical; wouldn't you be? She did not know this man or what he was talking about, so she eggs him on. "Sure, I'll take some of that magic water that you're going on about."

Suddenly, Jesus put all joking aside and snapped the woman back to reality. "Go, get your husband." How does this stranger know anything about my life? Now the woman is forced to face herself and her choices. She has had five husbands. Five. And now she's on a sixth man. I imagine this like a dramatic pause in a movie, where everything that she'd ever done came flooding into her mind. She saw the first man she loved, how they met how things seemed wonderful and life was perfect, but then something went wrong. Maybe she cheated on him, maybe he cheated on her. So she gave herself to another man and another and another. She continued this cycle until there was nothing left of her purity, nothing left of her innocence. Nothing about this woman was sacred anymore; she had let that all go. But for so many years she hid behind this mask, this mask that nothing was wrong. She hid behind it because she had to, and now this stranger was forcing her to deal with herself. In vs. 29, the woman says that "Jesus told me everything I had ever done." This conversation that John gives us is probably only the tip of the iceberg of the darkness that was revealed about the woman's past.

Facing yourself can be one of the most painful things that you will experience in life. Realizing that who you are and how you have been living is wrong can be excruciating and awful. And that's exactly what this woman went through. Bart Campolo, a Christian who works in the inner-city of Cincinnati, tells the story of a young girl that he knew. This girl was about his daughter's age and lived in the same neighborhood as he did, though she lived in the projects. She had to walk to school in this neighborhood, and it was a rough neighborhood. He wanted to help her out, so he began picking her up for school in the mornings. She was in his daughter's class, so it only made sense that he could help her out. One day he drove up to the usual place where he picked her up, and she wasn't there. So he went to her apartment to find out where she was and nobody was home. She lived with her mom. Somebody in the hall told him that she was at the hospital. So Bart drove his daughter to school and then drove to the hospital to see what had happened. When he arrived, he saw the mother sitting in the waiting room. He asked her what was wrong, and she said, "My daughter's been raped." This young girl, maybe 6th grade, was walking the stairs to her apartment. There were so many dark corners and areas where the lights were all blown out. So many of the rooms lay empty; the place was filthy, infested with rats and cockroaches. People didn't want to live there. And one day after school, a man

waited in one of those dark corners, snatched the girl, took her into an empty room and raped her. Bart went in to check on the girl and spent most of the day with her. Later that week, he went to visit the family at the apartment. He walked up to the door and heard the sound of screaming. The mother was yelling at the girl, saying that it was her fault that she had to go and get herself raped. Why did she have to do that? What was wrong with the girl? The mother kept going on and on. Bart stepped in and confronted the mother. They argued for a while, and he couldn't understand why the mother was blaming her daughter for being raped. And then it hit him. There was a reason why she was so upset with the girl. She had been raped too. Bart asked her about it, and she said yea. She said when she was raped, nobody cared about her. You see, this mother was forced to confront herself. She was forced to remember what had happened, to see how it had made her into who she was today, and it wasn't good.

In the same way, Jesus forced the Samaritan woman to take a good look at herself. She had to deal with the ugliness in her life. And this made her realize something. She recognized that she couldn't keep using men as something to fill that emptiness in her life. She knew something was missing. And Jesus was now offering it to her: Living water, the love of God.

Big Idea: So here's the point. ***There is a thirst in our beings for something better and more sustaining than this world. That thirst can only be quenched through knowing Christ, who takes away all emptiness forever.*** This thirst is something that is inside of us. Jesus didn't have to convince the woman that she needed something; she knew that. She knew there was a need and tried to fill it herself. Yet, this could not ultimately satisfy. Only when she was willing to truly acknowledge that emptiness could she accept true life through Christ.

Jesus looked past an awful lot of obstacles to speak with that woman. What rules and social barriers does Jesus break by associating with us? We may see the story of this Samaritan and think to ourselves that we are so much better than her. But is that really true? I can think of plenty of reasons why Jesus wouldn't, couldn't, and shouldn't talk to me, number one that I am a sinner who rejects Him daily and am completely deserving of death. And yet, he meets me at that well, speaks with me, and offers me true, living water, even while I hold another bucket in my hand ready to dip into the well of the world.

If we are going to become authentically human, we have to recognize that we thirst for something greater than what this world provides. Money, power, sex, possessions, position, authority, and family can be good things, but they will never fill us. Never. Christ is the only hope. He is the only life. Only when we take a serious look at ourselves can we understand our need for Christ. If we don't consider ourselves as needy, or if we think that we can take care of it ourselves, then we will miss the truly life giving quality of God, and we will fail.

"We are never safe from the longing for eternity which God has put in man's soul. There is a thirst which only Jesus Christ can satisfy." -William Barclay

We are never safe. No matter how satisfied or taken care of we may feel, no matter the heights or depths we will go to fulfill ourselves, we can never escape longing. Ever. How terrifying and awesome is that? I pray that we may search ourselves, face our demons, and drink in deeply of Christ's love and mercy.

