

THE FREE FLOWING WATERS OF THE SPIRIT

Sermon by Rev. Ron Farr

Based on John 4:5-15
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Out in my garage, rests a beautiful whirlpool tub still in the shipping crate. It has been sitting there for almost a year. I have been struggling to get the upstairs bathroom framed out, electrical and plumbing lines completed, and ceramic tiles laid down so that I can finally install the tub, and get into it. But I keep running out of time. I have been getting closer and closer to the day of installation – but it still eludes me.

Last summer, while in the thick of this bathroom construction, I had to run a test on the whirlpool tub to make sure the motor and the water jets were all working properly. That is done to spare the installer the nightmare of discovering that something is wrong with the motor after the tub has been permanently mounted into its cement bed, and then has to ripped out and shipped back to Tennessee.

So following the manufacturer's protocol, I dragged the tub out into the driveway, put it up on blocks, plugged up the drain hole, and filled it with a garden hose. Then I ran an extension cord out to the unit, plugged it in, and turned it on. It was thrilling to see the water swirling around the tub, beautiful crystal clear water flowing and bubbling – it was so inviting, so refreshing. I would have just jumped in if the water hadn't been 40 degrees! It made me anxious to press on and get the construction done upstairs so I could finally get to that day when I could jump into these living, healing waters. But, I haven't gotten there yet. I can enjoy those warm swirling waters only in my imagination.

This is often what our relationship to the Holy One is like. We can see the swirling waters of the Spirit or sense their presence or their reality, but we don't quite know how to get into them, like getting into the tub. We can imagine the healing power of God's presence bathing us. We can imagine the deep peace of God like a river flowing around us and through us.

We can imagine what it might be like to have the consciousness, as Jesus did, of God's eternal mind, a mind that is unruffled and tender even in the midst of human drama and conflict. We can imagine the swirling, healing, loving waters of the Spirit cleansing us and renewing us, but it's so ephemeral sometimes – and it seems so frustratingly out of reach.

Sometimes, we just don't know how to reach down into the well of God's kingdom, and scoop up its waters.

One hot day, Jesus and some of his disciples were traveling through Samaria near a town called Sychar. Jesus sent the disciples into town to buy some provisions while he sat down by the town well which was called Jacob's Well. At high noon a single Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. She quite likely was an outcast, perhaps a loose woman with a bad reputation, since women according to custom always came to the public well in groups and usually came in the early morning.

Jesus strikes up a conversation with this lone woman, and he asks her for a drink. The woman is taken aback a bit, since Jesus was a single male and a Jew, and Jews did not share anything with Samaritans, including words, since Jews considered Samaritans to be heretics and to be "beneath" them. So this rather feisty Samaritan woman replies, *"How is it that you a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"*

Jesus goes beneath all the layers of established custom and social prejudice, and he says to her, *"If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."* Her curiosity is now peaked. *"Where does one get this water," she says, "for you have no bucket and the well is deep?"* Jesus responded, *"Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again.... but the water that I will give (you) will become in (you) a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."*

The well where Jesus and this woman met was 8-feet in diameter and descended down through the limestone 75 feet. At the bottom of this well was a living spring that never went dry. The landscape at the surface of the well, typical of Palestine, was barren, parched, and desert-like. But deep down, 75 feet down, was a bubbling spring that quenched people's thirst, grew their crops, and kept the town nourished and alive.

Jesus is helping this woman, and is helping you and me today, to understand that there is a deep well of water, a deep spring of spirit, peace, and power, that Jesus is trying to open in us. He is trying to open the flood gates of heaven within us, and unleash the life-giving waters of God's eternal grace and healing. But so much of our time in life is lived in scarcity, without this knowledge and without this experience. Like that Samaritan woman at the well who we later learn has had five husbands, our relationships and our work life sometimes get a little messed up and off track. Sometimes we become so over-booked and burned out, so uninspired and depleted by all our activities that our lives, like the landscape around Jacob's well, become quite parched and barren.

The more we get caught up in our own ego-drives and need for accomplishments, the more we have "a freight-train-mind" that is filled with endless worries and needs, the more we are consumed with solving daily problems, getting our way, or making ourselves comfortable, the more plugged up our well becomes. And when we find ourselves in the midst of painful events or threatening life changes, we can get so distracted and restless that we forget all about praying or coming to God, and we cannot find any soothing water for our wasted and parched spirits.

Our wells that lead down deep into the realm of God's bubbling, living Spirit sometimes get so cluttered with the debris of our busyness, our worries, or our self-orientation that we lose access to the water altogether. And our lives become a lonely wasteland. What are the ways that you plug up your well, and sever your connection with the living spring of God's spirit?

The other day I was sitting by the Black River and watching the heavy spring flow of water and the river's powerful currents raging through the gorge. And the thought occurred to me, *"How strange it would be if one day I came to sit by the river, and found no water at all – not even a drop – just dry rocks, and cliffs that held memories of flowing water from eons past. How strange and disconcerting it would be to peer over the edge of these river cliffs and find no water at all."* And then I thought how that would never happen, because all this water from the western Adirondack Mountain watershed all drains through Watertown, and this river we call the Black River has been flowing for millions of years. It has never gone dry. Its waters will always flow, every day of every year - you can depend on that.

Now Jesus is saying the same thing to us about the living spring of God's spirit within us. It never goes dry. It gushes up to eternal life. It is opened and becomes free flowing when we start walking the way of Christ, when we let go of the drives and hurts of our egos and accept the life-giving invitation to be one of his disciples here at Emmanuel. Jesus is trying to teach us a way of life that is not dependent on our efforts to save ourselves or make ourselves happy – as if we really knew how to do that. He is trying to teach us a way of life that finds its power, and peace, and refreshment in the deep life-giving source of God's spirit which is one well that NEVER goes dry.

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul speaks of a *"thorn in his flesh."* We don't know what this thorn was exactly – he never tells us in his writings. Some Biblical scholars speculate that Paul's thorn could have been a medical challenge like epilepsy. Maybe Paul's thorn was an addiction, or an anger problem, or a problematic person in his life – we don't know and we don't need know. Because we all know that our lives, like Paul's, are full of thorns.

We suffer painful disappointments – we are disappointed in ourselves or in others. We suffer losses. Friends move away or betray our trust. Children grow up and change so much that we hardly recognize them anymore. Each day is pricked by stresses and anxieties. We have to deal with hard-nosed bosses or antagonistic neighbors that irritate us and make our lives miserable. We must face and accept discouraging physical limits as we grow older. We must be patient when others are impatient with us. We must be loving when we don't feel like being loving.

And when we open our eyes and see the injustices of the world, hearing of children accidentally shot to death in our cities in drive-by-shootings, and reading about the millions of people and families in Africa decimated by the AIDS epidemic, we suffer terribly within. And even when we rise up to do something about such injustices, we suffer from the pain of not knowing what to do. And even if we find something to do, like giving financially to some mission agency, we still suffer for doing so pitifully little.

So we all know about these thorns that Paul spoke about, these thorns of life that pierce our hearts and our flesh that can never be avoided – they are an integral part of living each day. Somehow we, as Christians, must learn to find our happiness, our peace, our fulfillment, our joy even while we, like Jesus, are wearing a “crown of thorns.” What Paul discovered was that God was not anxious to take away his thorn, because God wanted Paul to learn that God’s grace was sufficient – that’s all he needed.

In other words, these thorns of life don’t necessarily drive us into the desert where there is no water. They instead teach us that we do not need to rely on ourselves, we do not need to be afraid of being depleted or taken advantage of, we do not need to be “problem free” or “thorn-free” with everything going smoothly in order to be happy. We need only to rely on the living spring of water welling up to eternal life – a spring of love and grace, of peace and power that, like the Black River, never goes dry. What does it matter if we have a few thorns in our side, if we are swimming in God’s love and grace and power?

In the hymn, “Peace Like a River,” which we are about to sing, we hear these words: *“I’ve got peace like a river, I’ve got peace like a river in my soul. I’ve got love like an ocean, I’ve got love like an ocean in my soul. I’ve got joy like fountain, I’ve got joy like a fountain in my soul.”* There is a river of peace, an ocean of love, a fountain of joy inside you and me. Why not take Christ more seriously and let him show you how his way of walking through life will unleash all of that within you! You just have to get out of the way, and let these inexhaustible waters of peace and love and joy begin to flow. We need to let them swirl around us, and swirl around our neighbors, and swirl around those we are praying for, and swirl around even those who disturb us or who are different from us. These free-flowing waters of God’s spirit and grace are vast, and they hold everyone of us without exception.

Some day - and I hope that day is soon - I will install our new whirlpool tub. And I look forward to that day when I will sit in those swirling waters that ease the pain in my lower back. And likewise, some day, each one of us will discover what Jesus was talking about when he said, *“The water that I will give (you) will become in (you) a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”*

Some day we will learn that we do not need to be driven any more by our insecurities, our fears, our jealousies, our loneliness, or our resentments. Some day we will learn the wisdom and way of Jesus - we will learn that we never have to put anybody down in order to breathe and become who God wants us to become. We never have to fight again to prove our worth or to gain love and understanding. Why? Because deep inside of us, if we will only let go to it, there is a spring of living water, an vast ocean of Spirit, that is just waiting to gush up into our hearts and minds, fill us with God’s grace and joy, and take all our pain and sorrow away.

Let us dig into the well. Let us get into the river, and let the free flowing waters of the spirit begin to flow, and take us to where God wants us to go.