

## **H<sub>2</sub>O**

John 2, 4, 7, 19 (selected verses)

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on February 24, 2008, the Third Sunday of Lent at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### **Focus Text**

#### **John 2:1-11**

*On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine...the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*

#### **John 4:7-15**

*A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'...The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' ... Jesus answered 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.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 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.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'*

#### **John 7:37-39**

*On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."' Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.*

#### **John 19:28-30**

*After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit....One of the soldiers pierced his side [belly?] with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.*

I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, a city perched atop the bluffs of the Mississippi River. I crossed the muddy waters of that river via two different bridges at several turning points in my life.

- As a child, riding in the back seat of a green-and-white '54 Chevy, I would cross the river into Arkansas, alight into the open arms of my grandparents and be welcomed with chocolate waiting on the coffee table in the living room.
- During my high school years, the “old bridge” across the river was being replaced with a “new bridge.” I joined my classmates to be photographed for our senior picture looking over the waters from an expanse of the bridge not yet finished – a location which no school nor insurance company would grant permission for a class picture today.
- On an all night trip home, I crossed the waters of the Mississippi and found my way to Methodist Hospital in Memphis, where my dad had been taken when his cancer was spreading and his radiation failing; and one week later, the day after his funeral, I crossed those waters again to back in time for Western Civ 101 at 8:00 o'clock on Monday morning.
- I crossed the river in a Ryder truck moving from the Upper West Side of New York to the eastern prairie of west Texas to begin my ministry; and when they were young, I took my two children to the far reaches of northern Minnesota, where we stepped across the trickle from the ground that formed the headwaters of the Mississippi.

The waters of the Mississippi River have flowed through my life, dividing childhood from adolescence, innocence from grief, study from work, east from west.

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Water flows through the Gospel of John as poignantly as it flows through the stages of my life.

- Water makes its first appearance in John on a sacred occasion – as Jesus turns it into wine at a wedding at Cana.
- Water gurgles up in a sacred place – as Jesus engages and is engaged by a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well.
- Water meanders through a sacred holiday – the Festival of Booths – and elicits from Jesus a promise that “out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water” and elicits from the writer John an explanation that such water is about “the Spirit, which believers...[are] to receive” once Jesus is glorified in death and resurrection.
- Likewise water gushes forth from sacred act – when, following his death on the cross, mixed with blood, it spews from his body, released by the insertion of a soldier's spear.

Indeed, the Gospel of John floats on water from start to finish, like the raft carrying Huck and Jim floats down the Mississippi in what has been called the finest novel written in America.

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The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well is instructive. It is a conversation about water. It may be familiar to you.

The woman has what history has always assumed to be three strikes against her:

- She is Samaritan – a mixed race with whom the Jewish people, Jesus' people, have “no dealings” other than years of hatred, violence, bitter recrimination.
- She is a woman – forbidden for Jewish males (like Jesus) to address in public, forbidden for rabbis (like Jesus) to address at all.
- And by popular lore and centuries of interpretation, she is considered is a sinner – married five times, cohabitating at present with a man not her husband – though she is never labeled such by Jesus or John.

Despite these alleged strikes against her, Jesus speaks to her at Jacob's well, violating taboos against speaking to a Samaritan, speaking to a woman, speaking to one considered a sinner.

In the conversation, he makes a distinction between the well water to which they have both gone to quench their physical thirst and the water of eternal life he claims to offer from his heavenly origins.

When Jesus says: “Everyone who drinks of this water [from the well] will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water I give will never be thirsty [for] the water I give will become in them a spring...gushing up to eternal life,” he is conceptually separating well water from the water of life, to make a point in his teaching.

But the woman immediately cuts to the chase and mixes the two waters: “Sir, give me this water,” she says, “so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

- In her response, had she been referring simply to well water, she would have acknowledged that while it would quench her thirst for a while, she would have had to return again for more.

- But when she says, “Give me *this water so that* I may never be thirsty,” she clearly grasps that what Jesus offers both eliminates physical thirst and brings eternal life.<sup>1</sup>

She puts together well water and the water of eternal life as inseparably as two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen to form the water we drink daily.

- Contrary to what many commentators say, the writer John does not depict her as a sinful woman being rescued from illicit relationships with men by Jesus; rather, John simply depicts her as someone who early on understands that when Jesus speaks of water, he speaks both of that which prevents thirst and that which offers eternal life.
- As she puts well water and the water of life together, she bears witness to Jesus’ full identity as one who comes from heaven, who brings his Father’s desire for us to earth,<sup>2</sup> who pitches his tent among us,<sup>3</sup> who unites himself to us, and then who returns to heaven, along the way defining the life he offers us as something beginning on this earth but continuing after our earthly death.
- He who turns water *into* wine at the beginning of his ministry gives forth water and wine at his death, defining once and for all that human life consists of heaven and earth conjoined, body and spirit intermixed, well water and water of eternal life as one.

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All right; enough about water. Let’s turn the faucet off so we can hear what Christ may be trying to say to us with this flow of conversation with the Samaritan woman.

What I glean from this talk about water is the following:

Because well water and the water of eternal life are one, the Christian faith into which we have entered is one that does not separate body from soul, earth from heaven, this life from the life to come.

In the Christian faith, the purpose of our lives is not simply to endure this life until we finally escape it in the life to come; not simply to seek salvation for our souls that we might leave behind our bodies and our earth. Rather, our purpose is to live in this world, caring for body and soul, caring for earth and heaven, caring for sacred and profane at one and the same time.

Because well water and the water of eternal life are one, everything in this world can be and in fact is the subject of our joy, our affection, and our ministrations.

- Art and music
- Sports and work
- High culture and low culture
- Military action and diplomatic initiative
- Feeding people vegetable soup and homemade sandwiches and sitting with them at the shelter to which they come for meals and sleep as well as drinking wine and dining on salmon at a white-clothed table next to our granddaughter and husband of a few minutes and watching as the band begins to play for their first dance as husband and wife

All these are places sacred and profane in which we may find this inseparable combination of well water and the water of eternal life. All are places to which we may bring this inseparable combination and share it with those in our midst.

Just like the waters of the Mississippi River have floated through my life in times of joy and sadness, hope and heartache, the waters of Jesus Christ float through our lives as well water and water of eternal life, inseparable, leaving us never thirsty and calling us always to share their inseparable mix with every human being, every human circumstance, within our power.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> For a fascinating interpretation of this text, and of what he calls “hydraulics” in the Gospel of John, see Stephen D. Moore, “Are There Impurities in the Living Water that the Johannine Jesus Dispenses? Deconstruction, Feminism, and the Samaritan Woman,” in *Biblical Interpretation* 1, 2 (1993), 207-227.

<sup>2</sup> In John 4:23, which appears later in this story, the word “seek” can also be translated “desire.” See also Moore, 207-208, 225-227.

<sup>3</sup> John 1:14, “lived” can mean literally “pitched his tent.”