

## **Come to the Water: Living Water**

### **John 4:5-15**

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There is a question that Methodists have asked each other since the beginning of the Methodist movement: How goes it with your soul? In other words, how are you feeling about yourself, your life, and your relationship with God? The question was used most often in small groups of Methodists who met for mutual accountability and support because living life the way Jesus taught us is hard, and we need a few friends to keep us on the path.

Centuries later, the great theologian, Howard Thurman, asked another related question. In his book “Meditations of the Heart”, Thurman asks, “are you a reservoir or are you a canal or a swamp?” When you consider how things are going with your soul, what do you see? If you are a person who values making connections, who leans into relationships to stay joyful and vital, then you might be a canal. A reservoir is a storage vessel for a large quantity of water that both flows in and flows out, so if you are someone with a deep reserve of faith, of joy, of hope to draw from and to share, your soul might be a reservoir. But, if you are feeling stuck in your faith and in your life, if you look inward and see muck and murkiness, then this might be a time when your soul is like a swamp. A swamp has no outlet. The water doesn’t move; it sits and stagnates while whatever life is in it slowly decays.

I think a lot of us are feeling pretty swampish these days. There is so much bad news, so much anger and fear, so much negative hyperbole on social media, and it is all flowing into our hearts and minds and just rots there because we don’t know what to do with it.

While what is happening in the news is front and center for many of us, there are, of course, other reasons your soul might feel swampy. Perhaps you suffer from unaddressed past trauma that still holds you hostage feeling scared or ashamed or worthless. Or you are feeling overwhelmed as if your life is out of your control. Or maybe you’re feeling burned out, unable to keep going or find meaning or joy in what you do.

All of these life experiences, and many more, can leave us in the swamp. And I suspect that’s where we find the Samaritan woman that Jesus meets at the well. This is one of the most profound stories in the Gospels because there are so many layers to what happens in their encounter. As she suggests when she says, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?”, for a man to be alone and talking with a woman was unthinkable. And for a Jew to be having a friendly conversation with a Samaritan was unheard of.

We learn a little later in the story that she has been married five times. While that is probably more about the circumstances of her life than her morality, there are people still today who would raise an eyebrow if they heard about her serial marriages. Perhaps she is being ostracized by her community as they ask themselves, “Is she a shrew, a black widow, a harlot?”

What is more likely is that she is a woman to whom life has been unkind - one who carries with her the wounds left behind by trauma. In response to her surprise when he asks her for a cup of water, Jesus tells her that he can offer her living water, water that will become a spring of water

inside her and will well up to eternal life. Clearly, he was no longer talking about water from the well, but water that quenches a deep spiritual thirst.

Imagine how this conversation must impact her! After having been either invisible or the topic of gossip her whole life, here is this man who sees beyond all the reasons she is marginalized. As David Lose puts it, “He has seen her plight -- of dependence, not immorality. He has recognized her, spoken with her, offered her something of incomparable worth. He has *seen* her -- she exists for him, has worth, value, significance and all of this is treatment to which she is unaccustomed.”

Not only does he see the whole person she is, but he also offers her a gift that will transform her life and free her from the swamp. This is what Jesus did for people - for the poor and the sick and the hungry and the exiled. No wonder crowds followed him as he arrived in Jerusalem that Palm Sunday!

We’re still left, however, with the question of what this living water is. We understand that it is metaphorical, but what is it that Jesus is referring to? Jesus speaks of living water again in John 7:37-39, which says, *On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.*

So, living water is the Holy Spirit. Living water is God’s own self, the essence of God which can revive and transform us. Living water is the unmerited, unconditional love of Jesus that offers us grace and healing and abundant life, what he speaks of as “eternal life”.

Unfortunately, over time, we have lost the full meaning of the words “eternal life”. Yes, they refer to the promise we have that there is a life beyond this physical life we’re living right now. But, they also refer to the joy of living fully, deeply, and vibrantly that comes with living as Jesus lived. Living water pours into you God’s Spirit and led by God’s Spirit, you thrive.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that the Samaritan woman will instantly no longer be marginalized. That would require systemic change - changes to a society that has become rigid with rules and impoverished by the Roman Empire. However, it does mean that she will be loved - exactly as she is. Love grows where the Spirit of God is, just as life grows when a swamp is diluted with fresh, clean, abundant water. And when enough people who have been transformed by love come together, they can change systems and challenge the evil powers of this world.

Now, how do we get ahold of some of this living water? Let’s go back to Howard Thurman for a minute. Thurman believed that we are our best selves when our souls are like a reservoir - a container that holds the love of God. Love flows in and love flows out. He writes, “Now if your life is to move in the sense of which I’m thinking, that there is the movement, the creative intaking and outgoing of the reservoir, there must be something available to you by which you view your life, by which you regulate your life...In other words, each of us must find a resource that we can tap, that we can draw upon, to fill our lives with Living Water so that there will be an outgoing from us to irrigate many parched places so that all who know us will find in us a benediction breathing peace.”

Thurman goes on to talk about a few different possible resources. He suggests spending time in quiet, possibly meditating, or reading the Bible and other writings that reflect on the deeper dimensions of life.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, referred to resources such as these as means of grace. He included corporate worship, prayer, participating in the sacraments, fasting, reading scripture, and discussion with others who are on a similar journey. However, he also viewed doing good - feeding and clothing those in need, visiting the sick and those in prison, and seeking justice - as means of grace. At this time of year, attending all of the Holy Week services - Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and then Easter Sunday is surely one of the most powerful means of grace available to you.

These are all ways in which we encounter God's Spirit and receive God's grace. These are all sources of living water. And if we want to feel our souls alive - out of the swamp and into the reservoir or canal - we make them a priority in our lives.

For the last six weeks, we have explored some of the scripture stories in which God acts in wondrous ways through water. We have talked about God creating, cleansing, protecting, providing, and healing, but perhaps none is more powerful than the transformation God works within us with living water. God invites us into a life that is deeper, richer, and more meaningful. God invites us into freedom, joy, and overflowing love.

As we look toward Holy Week, we know we will see the depth of service and love Jesus offers his disciples, the horror of how humans can treat each other, and Jesus cry out from the cross, "I thirst". Even Jesus, as he suffered from the soul-crushing cruelty of those who crucified him, thirsts for the living water of God's Spirit.

We thirst, too. We thirst in the swamp of suffering, of old wounds and new, overwhelm, rage, exhaustion, and loneliness. We thirst. Will you drink from the cup Jesus offers us?

May it be so. Amen.

