

**“Deep Wells”
Vince Amlin
United Church of Gainesville
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Reflection 1

When I found out that our chamber music ensemble would be offering a five-part suite this morning, I thought it would be nice to break things up a bit and intersperse our scripture and sermon with their pieces. So, in this first section I will read our scripture from the Gospel of John chapter four, and later the sermon will be presented in two parts.

John 4:

³Jesus left Judea and started back to Galilee.

⁴But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. ⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus 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.” ¹¹The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” ¹³Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but 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.” ¹⁵The 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.”

As the ensemble plays I invite you to reflect on these words of scripture.

Reflection 2

Thanks to all those who, after hearing the story of having my iPod stolen, offered to sell me your used iPods. I finally took the plunge about a month ago and bought an iTouch. It’s like an iPod with internet access. It’s not an iPhone, but when I pretend to talk into it no one knows the difference. On my iTouch I have downloaded a number of games most of which I play for a day or two and then delete. But a couple weeks ago I downloaded a game called “Tap Resort,” which hasn’t been quite as easy to get rid of. In “Tap Resort” you build a resort on a tropical island by choosing different attractions to offer and, as you earn money from those attractions you upgrade them and buy new attractions with the goal of seeing how many tourists you can attract and what cool features will become available with your increasing cash flow. (Inexplicably, the Chinese Restaurant is one of the most expensive properties; it costs more than an ice hotel, which I imagine would be pretty expensive to keep up on a tropical island.)

In the meantime, while you save up to buy your Chinese restaurant, there is maintenance to be done. The visitors to your resort gradually become less impressed in

time, and their moods shift from big smiley face, to neutral face, to sad face. When they get down to sad face you have to buy them a drink to keep them on the island for a few more hours. These booze-fueled tourists are also extremely messy, and over time they scatter trash over the face of the island. So you have to tap the soda cans and banana peels to make them disappear and keep the island presentable. Otherwise: more sad faces, less visitors, and certain financial ruin. It is a stupid, stupid game. So stupid that it convinced me to also download "Tap Birds" and "Tap Fish" in which you run aviaries and aquariums, saving up for special fish and birds, and, of course performing the necessary maintenance that electronic animals require.

I've continued to play these games for a couple weeks now, but in my saner moments I find them less and less enjoyable. There is something a little too real about them, something a little too familiar. At least twice a day, I am spending half an hour scrubbing imaginary fish tanks with my finger, filling an imaginary bird feeder, and cleaning up imaginary trash left by my imaginary inebriated tourists. And it never stops. No matter how many times I feed the fish, when I return a few hours later they are hungry; no matter how many times I swipe the screen free of bird droppings they foul it again. No matter how many drinks I buy, later in the day the tide of sad faces has returned. And at some point it becomes too real. When I am picking up my 50th banana peel of the day, I finally wonder, "Is this really a game? Or is this some sick experiment to see how long I will continue to fight the degradation of this ridiculous virtual world? At some point it gets too real, and I become resentful of the tiny tourists for whom I have created this beautiful resort but who seem not to care, who begin to pout (probably on purpose) until I comp them some rummy concoction with an umbrella.

At some point it all gets too real because the insatiable desire of bird, and fish, and vacationer mirrors too closely the insatiable needs I feel inside myself and see in friends and family, mirrors too closely the unstoppable entropy of the world around me, the insatiable need I feel in the woman at the well. At first glance, her motivation to learn more about the living water seems to come simply from a desire to not have to walk out to the well anymore. It is no doubt exhausting work. The well is located outside the town walls; we're not sure how far. We know that in addition to bringing whatever vessel she needs to store the water, she must also bring her own bucket, and some scholars suggest that this well would not even have had a rope. So she may have been forced to bring one long enough to reach into what she feels is a very deep well. She is no doubt tired of coming to draw water at this well. But I think it goes a bit deeper than that.

I think she is frustrated that the vessel that she fills with water always becomes empty again, frustrated that no matter how much she drinks she is always thirsty again. There is a thirst beneath the thirst that really frustrates her. There is an emptiness beneath the emptiness of the vessel, a thirst beneath that of her own parched throat. I think it is emptiness itself, thirst itself, the insatiable desire present in all life and terrifyingly unquenchable, which is stalking this woman in the noonday sun.

Like those hungry birds or like the never-ending pile of laundry that lives at my house, what really concerns her is that "things fall apart." Life requires so much maintenance! Our houses, and cars, and churches are always breaking down, system by system, somehow both all at once, and continually. Paint flakes, oil leaks, the air conditioning units go, and you have to decide whether they can be fixed, or lived with, or must be replaced.

Our bodies, too, require our constant attention, must either be fixed, or replaced, or lived with. They require not only food and water and shelter and hygiene but dentists, and optometrists, and cardiologists to try and keep the center holding. Hearing becomes muffled, sight is dimmed, memory fades, and our medicine cabinets grow full with substances meant to stem the thirsty tide of death.

But more cumbersome than all of these, is the maintenance of our relationships: our marriages, and families, and friendships. Our relationships, in which thirsty people come together, trying to fill one another with love, or hate, or work. These take constant watering, and like long-needed rain, it disappears quickly. The ground is soon dry again, our partners need our assurances, our affections, our attention.

I think the thirst of relationship is especially potent in the woman at the well. She has gone out to draw water in the middle of the day, at high noon. As Sunshine State dwellers, you can appreciate the significance of this act. It is like choosing to mow your lawn at noon in Gainesville in July: if you're doing it, you must have a good reason. Many scholars have suggested that this woman is an outcast. In other stories throughout the bible we read of the women of the town coming out together to draw water in the early evening. Gathering water is not simply practical, it is social. But this woman has gone out at the hottest part of the day, specifically because she knows no one else will be there. It is suggested by many that she has been cast out from the society of women because, as we learn later in the story, she has had a string of failed relationships: five husbands, and the man she is with now is not her husband. It is not clear whether this might mean he is someone else's, but for whatever reason, she appears at noon, alone.

There is emptiness beneath the emptiness of the vessel she hefts out to the well, a thirst beneath her parched throat, and she has tried to fill it to no avail. I believe that thirst is a part of us all, part of our world, though we are only sometimes aware of it moving in us, or choosing for us. We only sometimes recognize that tug of deep need from inside, like the insistent nipping of ravenous fish or ravenous children. As we listen to the next musical selection, I invite you to consider that thirst, in your life and in the world. I invite you to reflect on that emptiness and to consider the ways, both healthy and unhealthy, that you have tried to fill it.

Reflection 3

Now the thirst of the woman was, of course, not only a spiritual thirst, not just an existentialist despair, but also, and most consciously, a very real physical thirst. After hauling all her water-fetching implements out to the well in the middle of the day, she is likely promising herself that the first bucket she draws out will go straight to her lips, that she will drain it dry and maybe even get a refill. Everyone else will be in their houses, or under trees, escaping the heat. Why shouldn't she treat herself to as much water as she can hold? She dreams about the water all the way out there; she imagines her lips dry and cracking, her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Maybe she will even dump that first bucket over her head. If there were a way she might even jump into the well,

submerge herself and drink and drink, until she got a stitch in her side. This thirst is a very physical thirst, and all she can think about is quenching it.

But then she sees him. Even from far off she can tell he is no good. After all, what kind of person goes to the well in the middle of the day? But as she draws closer, she grows even more horrified. He is a Jew, one of the hated cousins of her people. She assumes he will start a fight, probably call her a dog. That was their favorite insult to Samaritans. She has heard it plenty of times. She is used to taking abuse from everyone, and she will get through this. But pouring water over her head is out of the question now; so is a refill. She might be able to take a few short swigs, but she'll have to wait till home to really drink. She wants to get out of there as quickly as possible.

It is into this place of deep need, of deep thirst and deep antipathy, which Jesus appears at high noon, when all this woman wants is to avoid contact, when she really needs a drink of water, when she has been looking forward to nothing more than its cool, silvery trickle down her throat. When she is parched beyond belief and near exhaustion, he appears, and asks *her* for a drink.

This is, of course, not what she's expecting, and in fact the exact opposite of everything she has been anticipating. As she walks to the well, she is solely focused on quenching her thirst, on filling her vessel, and just at the moment when she is about to drink, this stranger asks her for the water. Just when she wants to be left alone, this enemy strikes up a conversation. Her thirst is strong, and her need is great, and *he* asks *her* for the water.

And I believe, though she does not quite know it yet, this is the key: the key to the passage, the key to her thirst, and the key to our own thirst. The rest of the story reads like a kind of riddle about what and where this living water is, but I think Jesus gives it away right at the beginning. I believe he and she have already begun to turn the valve which will let loose the spring that is bubbling up in her and in us. In that improbable request that one who is thirsty should slake the thirst of a stranger, should satisfy the needs of an enemy, Jesus opens the floodgates of her spirit to a radical reorientation. It is a radical reorientation because the answer is the last thing she would have thought, the exact opposite of the way she understood things. It's a reorientation like the punch line of a joke, or the climax of a movie.

In screenwriting they taught us that the best movies resolve in a way which is completely unpredictable but which, when it happens, strikes you as the only way things could have turned out. It is both a complete surprise and completely expected, like coming home to a place you've never been before. This is a little of what the woman feels when Jesus asks her for a drink of water.

When he reorients her: from need to service. It is a reimagining of herself, no longer as an empty vessel needing to be filled, but as a spring of cool water with its source in the infinite and eternal, a spring capable not only of quenching her own thirst but capable even, of refreshing others. It's a little like if you've ever been in a scary situation and had a child with you. You may be frightened, afraid for your life, but suddenly that child says something that shows that he believes you are his protector. And the entire situation changes in your mind. You find a reserve of courage you had not known.

When Jesus asks her for a drink, it turns everything on its head. Before that time all her thinking, all her hoping, all her praying was based on her belief that she lacked

something, that she needed something, that she was incomplete in some way, empty. But the living water that Jesus offers her is not some holy water she can drink or splash on and be made whole. It is nothing she can take, or get, or even do, but something she is meant to become.

What Jesus offers her is the chance to quench the thirst beneath her thirst by becoming water for others. She will no longer be thirsty, as the river is not thirsty. She will no longer be spiritually hungry, just as food is not hungry. She will no longer be empty, as fullness itself cannot be empty. She will be radically reoriented from need to service, her spirit turned inside out, to face the world she is called to love. And I believe, as radical an idea as it is, once it occurs to her she knows it is exactly what she has been looking for. That is why, later in the story, she is willing to believe that Jesus is the Messiah; that is why she runs back into the village and tells all the people she had been avoiding to come and see.

And I believe this is the living water which God offers to each of us, the opportunity to be radically reoriented away from our own needs toward the service of others, the call to paradoxically take our attention off our own feelings of incompleteness and place it instead on the deep needs of those around us: the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, those who mourn, the sick, the incarcerated, the outcast, and to find in service to these, the fullness we were missing.

This reorientation does not mean, of course, that we need never eat or drink again, nor that we are called to empty ourselves, to destroy ourselves for others. It does not ask one to starve or to die. But it does ask one's life. It seems like the last thing I want when I am feeling that emptiness ready to swallow me. But I believe it is also exactly what I need, and when, on those few occasions I have made that turn for some brief time, it feels right. Turning from my own needs to the service of others brings me into true community, a community in which all are blessed by each other's gifts rather than burdened by one another's deficits; a community in which, in the midst of great need, all recognize streams of living water stretching from eternity, from God, and flowing through each of us, streams capable of healing a broken world. As the ensemble plays again, I invite you to consider the places where you serve and the places you may be called to serve.