

What do you want out of life? Where do you see yourself in five years? If you've lived long enough these are questions you've asked or have been asked. Perhaps in a deep conversation with a trusted friend, or at a job interview where a prospective employer is trying to decide whether you're the type in whom the company can invest. They are questions that speak to our deepest longings and give our imaginations free reign to come up with multiple favorable scenarios.

The truth is we tend to want more out of life or imagine for ourselves a life-trajectory that far outpaces the realities that this world can possibly offer. No matter how much we get, or whatever it is that we do get, sooner or later we want something more or different.

One of my favorite professors in seminary was the philosopher Diogenes Allen. Dr. Allen was almost as passionate about Plato as he was about Jesus and I'll always remember how in his lecture on the dialogue with *Gorgias*, he put aside his notes and stepped away from the podium to address what he thought was the heart of the matter. "Our lives," he said, "are like leaky jars. We are containers into which things are always being poured but which never are filled because there is a hole in each container and something is always leaking out. We often think and act as though if we only had a little more, we would be satisfied, or if we had something different our potential would be realized, our happiness assured, our fullness achieved. Yet we are at peace for such short periods, and it only takes the news that someone else has attained recognition, some honor, some praise, for us to feel a pang of envy or discontent."

This, to him, was enough to raise the question of whether the world is all that there really is. It's difficult for us to square the fact that our aspirations are so lofty, yet they are such that they can't be realized in the limited amount of time we have. Yet our hearts are restless. Those who are successful ponder whether this world is all there really is because they have gained all that there is to gain and yet they are still searching for more. The unsuccessful because they have so little hope unless there is more to this world. I wonder where you fit in on this spectrum? What do you long for? What do you want out of life? What brings you deep and abiding joy?

It's interesting that while these are deep questions, they aren't particularly intellectual. We are, above all, desiring creatures. We love the things that we long for.

We often, even if we are unaware of it, expect to find what we are longing for in experiences – the trip of a lifetime, a passionate and dizzying romance, a bucket list, or in people – a spouse, our children, friends. But experiences are temporary and people disappoint. Our scripture from John's gospel is a story about the reorientation of desire from that which is temporary to that which is eternal. John takes care to show that Jesus is the answer to Israel's longing of which Isaiah prophesied. So let us hear the word of the

Lord from John chapter four, verses four through thirty and then again at thirty-nine through forty-two.

But Jesus had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The 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.) 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.'

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.'

\* \* \* \* \*

There's a common courtship ritual mapped out in the pages of the Bible. It begins with a stranger loitering by a well and meeting a local woman. This is how Isaac, Jacob, and Moses met their wives. It was the hub of a community. So whenever we see a man and a woman meeting at a well, we can assume that the story is going to end in marriage. Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well – he is replaying such a courtship scene.

Let me explain. For the children of Israel, Jews and Samaritans alike, there was one number that symbolized completeness. The number seven. God made the world in seven days. Jacob labored for seven years to marry Rachel, Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream of seven fattened cows and seven lean cows to mean seven years of full harvest to be followed by seven years of famine. Joshua marched around the walls of Jericho for seven days – and so on.

So if seven was the number that epitomized perfection, then the number six was that bit just painfully short of completeness. Richard mentioned a couple of weeks ago how at the wedding in Cana there were six stone containers of water that were set aside for the rites of purification. It was not quite complete – something was missing.

And here we have a woman whom we are told is fetching water in the middle of the day, when the sun is beating down – most women would have gone in the cool of the morning, so we can tell that she is an outcast. She has had five husbands and the man she is currently with is not her husband. These are not extraneous details. Five failed marriages and an unstable relationship make six. Something in her life is missing and incomplete. She is searching for fulfillment, but it is elusive.

Behind the scenes of this personal encounter lie the rocky history of relationships between Jews and Samaritans. The woman is surprised that Jesus would ask to drink from her impure vessel. The disciples have gone to get food that is undefiled by Samaritan hands. The animosity between the two ethnic groups has its origin in the 8<sup>th</sup> century Assyrian invasion of Israel. After the people had been allowed to move back to their homeland, the Jews rejected an offer of cooperation from the Samaritans because they had grown suspicious of their ethnic and religious impurity. They began to worship separately, the Jews in the temple on Mt. Zion, the Samaritans establishing a rival temple on Mt. Gerizim. 2 Kings 17 describes the Assyrian invasion and chronicles the five kinds of foreign people whom the people intermarried with and whose gods were worshipped in Samaria. Suddenly we see the conversation shifting to another plain – the false gods of the five invaders are represented by this woman's five husbands. They have left her vulnerable and unfulfilled.

But what about the sixth? The man whom she is living with, but is not married to? Historians point out that Herod turned the capital of Samaria into a Roman city called Sebaste – the Greek name for Emperor Augustus who was worshipped as a god. Herod also allowed 6,000 Roman settlers to occupy the city. But the interesting thing is that these same historians note that the people did not intermarry with the Romans as they did with the Assyrians. Perhaps this helps us understand why Jesus says “and the one you now have is not your husband”. Five failed marriages and a tenuous relationship. Her disordered life is a reflection of the kind of disorder that marked Samaritan religion – the people became spiritually bonded to the false gods of five other peoples and are now subject to a sixth.

And so she finds herself alone in the middle of the day at a well with Jesus – the one in whom all her hopes and desires can be fulfilled. He is number seven. The one who brings completion. The gods of the Assyrians could not deliver her people, nor can the false god of Roman power. But Jesus can. He is the one in whom her heart may find its rest. He is the answer to her people’s deepest longing – he is the one who alone can quench their thirst.

And he has brought living water. The woman has a jar, but she has no water. And by the well she encounters Jesus who has no jar, but is the source of an endless stream of water. This conversation is important and so is the language. When the woman speaks of water she is referring to the kind of still, possibly stagnant, water that would come from a cistern. But the water that Jesus speaks about is living water – a crystal stream that is abundantly overflowing. Their conversation calls forth echoes of God’s word to the prophet Jeremiah: “What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me and chased after worthless things...they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that hold no water.”

The woman has come to draw water. But the water that she has been drinking is not good water. It can never satisfy – no matter how much water she draws from the well, she remains thirsty and must come again. The problem with her water is the problem with her husbands. The five she was married to failed to nourish her and the sixth keeps her thirsting. The Samaritans have wandered far from the God that brought them out of slavery and into a land that flows abundantly in exchange for false gods that imprison and whose only offer is stagnant water from a still well.

So this is a conversation taking place on two plains. On the personal level this is about our deepest longings and how they find their anchor in Christ – the source of abundant life. God has made us so that our souls thirst for Him. On the political level Jesus exposes the shallowness of every religious or political system that would seek to undermine the reality that he is Lord of Lords and King of Kings. His is not a kingdom of scarcity and oppression, but one in which, in the words of the prophet Isaiah: all who are thirsty, all who are weak, weary, and poor are invited to draw from the waters and be filled.

Let’s stay with the both levels of the encounter. At this point, the woman recognizes Jesus for who he is and so she moves the conversation toward worship. When we see God clearly, how do we worship? Once sin has been exposed, where can we turn for forgiveness? I think this part of the conversation sets up many resonances with some current approaches toward worship.

“Our ancestors,” she says, “worship on Mt. Gerizim, but you say that right worship can only be done in Jerusalem. Which is it?” It’s the age-old argument of “Well, we’ve got a well established tradition, and we’ve always done it this way.” “We’ve got a beautiful building, a remarkable choir, thoughtful preaching, and ample financial resources.”

Jesus says to the woman, “it’s not about your tradition. You are looking at God’s temple; like it or not, God chose to bring salvation through the Jews. And it may just be that one day all of these buildings will crumble away, all of these fine things on which you

ride yourselves will be forgotten. But worship isn't really about any of these things. It's about God, particularly the God of Israel. Being humbly and joyfully in the presence of God. Worship is about the formation of the heart and mind – it is the very things that shape our imaginations and mold our desires and set a course for how we orient ourselves in the world. So those who worship rightly worship the God that tells his story through the people of Israel, and not a god who is part of a different story. This is the God you've been looking for.

Just when the scene hits its climax, the disciples come in for a bit of comic relief – perhaps they're laughing it up when one of them notices Jesus alone with this Samaritan woman and the scene gets awkward. They stand their puzzled, scratching their heads. You see they had just come back from a mission – they went out to get food in this unclean place where they don't know the customs and have to fumble with the language and the fact that they were successful has them pretty pleased with themselves.

I remember a few years back Jill and I were in Berlin and there's a Starbucks right by the Brandenburg gate where we were taking pictures, so I went to get some coffee while Jill watched the camera and I successfully ordered our drinks in German. I came back with a goofy grin on my face expecting her to be impressed and Jill gave me this look like. "Uh. You got coffee. Thanks." I imagine that's what's going on here with the disciples.

But notice that the woman leaves her water-jar behind. The water-jar is the symbol of her constant search for that which will satisfy. It's also a reminder that her disordered life has made her a social outcast, having to fetch water in the heat of the noon-day when most women would come in the morning. Every-time she picks up that jar she is reminded of her sin, of her worth. She has no need of that jar because she has found the source of living water and she will never thirst again.

Not only does she leave it behind, but she uses the very words that Jesus uses to call his first disciples: "come and see". Come and see the man who has told me everything about my life. Come and see the man who has explained myself to me. Friends this is what evangelism looks like. It's not forcing something upon an unwilling audience – it's not passing out a booklet with a formulaic approach. It's one thirsty person telling another thirsty person where she might find water. It's telling someone what you love. And if your faith is a bit like a dry cistern, it may be hard to find the desire to share it, but if your faith finds its source in living water, then it will simply flow out of you.

Are you thirsty? That's why we keep coming here, isn't it? There are a lot of things you could be doing on a Sunday morning, but you are here. You're thirsty for something you can't get from Starbucks or even from a day out at the river. You're looking for something that will sustain you. You're here because from the moment you met Jesus you knew the taste of living water. You're here because in a moment you will drink from the cup of eternal life through which we abide in Jesus and he in us. Friends, come you who are thirsty and be filled. For Christ will satisfy. And may your life be filled to abundance – that all who thirst may see your abundant life and ask you where do you get this living water.