

We Are the Banquet

Gospel of John 4:5-42

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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'; 18 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 worshiped 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 worshipers 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. Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." 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 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."

Gospel of John 4:5-42, NRSV

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her: Give me a drink. But then he said: 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"... Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about...My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete God's work."

This is a long and radical passage. It has several twists and turns, and it is radical on a variety of levels...maybe not so much to us, here and now in 21st century America, but it was certainly off the menu, as it were, by the standards and norms of first century Palestine. First of all, it is the only place in any of the Gospels where Jesus is definitively referred to as a Jew. That's pretty big. And, his exchange here is with a Samaritan woman. You will remember from the story of the Good

Samaritan in Luke that folks from Samaria are, well, they are at the bottom of the social ladder. And so this passage is radical because this very public and blatant interaction and thus intersection crosses a steadfast socially constructed boundary between the chosen ones, the Jews, and the rejected ones, the Samaritans. And as if that scandalous border crossing were not enough, this passage blows a substantial hole in the gender barrier of the day. An itinerant unmarried man would not in a million years have been expected to speak on a public street with a woman unknown to him. An astonishing disregard here for the ingrained rules and expectations that served as fundamental pillars of social identity. Further, in a time and place where witnesses to God's power were almost exclusively the privilege of men, here a woman serves as the evangelist. The Samaritans said to her at the end of this passage: *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.* They know and believe because she showed them the way. This is waaaay radical. Not to mention really refreshing, I must admit.

There is yet another thread in this passage that likewise strays off the beaten path of the status quo. This passage begins with Jesus asking for a drink of water and then unfolds as he explains that the cool water in the well and the solid meal on the table are not true sustenance. They are not the things for which we should thirst and hunger. Jesus suggests, in this 1st century world of pervasive poverty and in this Samaritan community that is considered to be among the most underprivileged, that the meager spoils of their everyday lives, are empty.

This is a fitting story for this season of Lent. The season when Jesus reminds us that human beings do not live by bread alone, as he refuses the vittles offered him by the prince of darkness in the desert of discomfort. This is the season that marks the forty days and forty nights that Jesus survived on the manna of God's grace alone. Scandalously radical...if not somewhat unbelievable.

In the preface to Jim Crace's richly written book *Quarentine*, he quotes from the scientific book called *The Limits of Mortality*. The authors of that book say: *An ordinary man of average weight and fitness embarking on a total fast – that is, a fast in which he refuses both his food and drink – could not expect to live for more than thirty days, nor to be conscious for more than twenty five. The forty days of fasting described in religious texts would not be achievable – except with divine help, of course.* And so.....we believe. We believe that Jesus survived in the wilderness for 40 days and nights, tended, of course, by angels, as the Gospels say. He made it with God's help. As we will, we are told. But we also believe that such material deprivation, such asceticism, will lead us to a more spiritual, more divinely ordained plain. And so when Jesus tells us in this morning's passage that we are harvesting the wrong fields.....many of us take the opportunity of this season to shift the locus of our focus, to rewire our desire, to shift our longing from the material world to the spiritual realm.

And while I am not dissing the value of self-discipline and am in no way championing self-indulgence, I think that this morning's warning about the danger of sinking our hopes and lives in material sustenance, is not as clear cut as it may seem.

Because from the get-go, our scripture has related a series of creation and re-creation stories that are distinctly marked by what we humans can and cannot, should and should not, consume. You will remember the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were welcomed to eat anything they desired EXCEPT for the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It was the ethereal apple and not the concrete, cholesterol filled double chocolate turtle supreme brownie Sundae that sunk the whole human race into a centuries long malaise over that one original sin! And then there was Noah. And God said to Noah, "Every living thing that lives shall be food for you....except, flesh with its life, that is, its blood." (9:3-5) Noah was not only permitted, but encouraged to go back to the buffet as often as he want to. The Israelites enslaved in Egypt were instructed, and in fact mandated to eat the Passover meal every year – God did not ask them to fast in honor of their hardship, but to feast! And then in the vast wilderness, they were offered water from a wandering rock (as we heard in this morning's reading from Exodus) and manna from God. Granted, they were only permitted one day's portion at a time, but that was a divine lesson in gratitude and control, not a challenge to be God's Biggest Loser.

And from that passage in Exodus came the part of our most precious prayer: And so we humbly ask God to Give us this day our daily bread. Bread that we can swallow. Bread that will lead to life. Like the double meaning of the word ruach in Hebrew which means both breath and spirit. The Arabic word "esh" is the root of both bread and life.

And in this very Gospel of John, Jesus' first miracle at Cana – he turned the water into wine. And later in this Gospel, he tells the bridegroom to keep the best wine for last...etc., etc. And there are many many examples throughout our entire scripture of the value of God's tangible, empirical gifts.

My point is that there is not such a clear cut boundary between the gifts of God. The water in the well, the water from the rock, the water with which Jesus baptizes – they are all elements of the kingdom of heaven, which is not so much a place, but a process – a process of embracing the gifts of God in the name of a new creation. And one of the best illustrations I know of that New Creation, that Kingdom of Heaven on earth, is in an old Buddhist story:

The student asked the Master. What is the difference between heaven and hell? And the Master said follow me. And he led the student down a long hallway. And he opened a wide set of double

doors and inside was a huge banquet room. And the room was chock full of round banquet tables piled to the ceiling with a feast fit for a king. The food was amazing. And yet, all of the people were thin and gaunt and sickly. They were moaning and groaning and sad. For instead of hands they each had a pair of chopsticks...three feet long. And though they could easily reach the delicious food, they could not reach their hungry mouths to save their lives. The chopsticks were too long. The Master said to the student – My child, this is hell. And he closed the doors and walked across the hall to another set of doors. And when they were opened, the student saw the same huge banquet room. And the same massive banquet tables piled with the same sumptuous food. But the people in this room were healthy and happy with rosy cheeks and big sparkling smiles. They too had three foot chopsticks instead of hands.....but they were feeding each other. This, said the Master, is heaven, and that is the difference between heaven and hell.

This is the true food of the spirit. This is the banquet to which we are called by God. A banquet that requires that we serve each other. This is the food of which Jesus speaks. A food that allows us to serve each other without fear...trusting that we will be served in return. Trusting, that we need not worry about getting what we need –whether it is food, or shelter, or clothing, or compassion, or understanding, or love – Trusting that between God and our neighbors all of our needs will be met in abundance.

And this service and reciprocal trust is the paradox that is embodied in this morning's passage in which Jesus first asks a forbidden neighbor (a Samaritan woman) for a drink of water and then proceeds to tell her that he already has a water that will preclude his and her thirst forever. This is the Good News in living color! This is the way that use God's gifts for God's purposes.

So my friends, the next time you are in Samaria or the like, stop and ask for a drink of water, and when the next parched pilgrim passes your door, offer one as well. For those who will drink of this water, will never be thirsty again.

Jesus said: *My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete God's work."*

Amen.

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