

I have discovered over the years that there are still a few words that no Californian, I won't say no Californian, Californians seem to struggle with my English accent. One of them sadly is my name. Why Mark is so difficult for people to understand, I'll never know. There's another word that's problematic, especially in restaurants. I'll arrive in a restaurant, I'll sit at a table, the waitress will come up and say, "What would you like to drink?" And I'll say, "Oh, I'll have a glass of water, please." Nine times out of 10, they'll say, "What?" I mean, what do they think I'm saying? I've just arrived. There's an empty glass in front of me. There's plenty of clues, but they don't get it. So now, if I go to a restaurant, the waitress comes and says, "Would you like something to drink?" I say, "Yes, please. Can I have a glass of water?" And they get it.

Now, I mentioned this because the word water comes many times in our gospel reading today, and I want you to know that when I say water, what I'm really meaning is water. But for the purposes of this sermon, I'm just going to stick with water. So, bear that in mind as we go through.

Jesus talks in this passage with a Samaritan woman about living water. And in fact, this is the longest dialogue he has with anybody in any of the gospels. In the text, it's much longer than the version I read because I edited it. And the reason I edited it is because much of, well, not much of the discussion, but there's several verses about where Jesus mentions the domestic background of the woman -- she had five previous marriages and that she wasn't living with someone who was her husband. And I've come to see that that aspect of the conversation can be distracting because I've often heard preachers say, "Well, of course, the woman comes to the well at noon in the heat of the day because she's guilty, because she's ostracized from her community, because she was ashamed. That's why she was there at that time."

But actually, I think that might be misleading. When Jesus mentions her domestic situation, he might well not be referring to her sexual history so much as her economic story, because marriage at that time was an economic arrangement between two families, and this woman might well have been traded and might not have had much choice about who she should

marry. And perhaps most significantly of all, when Jesus talks with this unnamed Samaritan woman, they don't talk about sin or guilt or the need for forgiveness. They have this deep and rich theological conversation, and I want to focus on that in this sermon.

So let me set the scene. Jesus is going from south to north, from Judea to Galilee, and that means he had to go through Samaria, which was full of Samaritans, which was an issue because the Jews and the Samaritans had had a 400-year feud. And Jesus stops alone by this well in the middle of the day. It's a well-known well, half a mile from the town of Sychar, and it's still there. You can still see it.

And no doubt when this woman comes to the well, she's surprised to see Jesus sitting there. Maybe there was an awkward silence between them, especially as she realizes that it's a Jewish man who's waiting by the well. And she's probably thinking, "Well, I'll just get the water and go as quickly as I can." But it wasn't that simple. Jesus takes the initiative and speaks to her, which is she wouldn't have been expecting a Jew to talk to her, a Samaritan, a man, to address her, a woman. But Jesus makes a request and in so doing, he breaks down all the barriers that there might have been between them. And Jesus is still in the business of breaking down barriers and reaching out to us. If there are barriers between us and God, then God didn't put them there.

As St. Paul writes in that epistle we heard from Romans, "God proves his love for us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." And he goes on, "We were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, surely having been reconciled will we be saved through Jesus Christ. We have received reconciliation." God in Christ has done all that needs to be done to reconcile us to him, to bring us into peace with him. He has reconciled himself to us, or us to him. If there's something still unreconciled, if there's something between us and God, then we've put it there. God always makes the first move and takes the initiative. That's what we act out in baptism. When we baptize a child, we're acting out that great reality that God comes to us first in love. The call on us is always to respond to God's initiative.

Another thing I notice in the passage is Jesus' offer of living water. What is that? Maybe just as our bodies need physical water, maybe our souls need living water. I certainly know what the opposite of living water is. It's stagnant water. As I prayed with this passage, I realized that I've spent far too long fooling about with stagnant water. It's got a strange attraction, even though we know it does us no good. Jesus said, "If anyone is thirsty, let them come to me and drink and I'll provide streams of living water." That is a beautiful, wonderful, open invitation.

But how many people take up that invitation? Too few. Imagine this scene, that you're walking on the John Muir Trail on a hot August afternoon, you get to the end of the trail, and you're delighted to find in the parking lot a refrigerator stacked with ice-cold water and it's free. So, you take a glass or a bottle of water and you're sipping it when you notice somebody in the distance coming down the trail. And as they get closer, you see they stop and they put their head down and they drink from a fishpond, green with algae. And you think, "That's odd." And you go to them and you take a bottle and you say, "Look, did you know there's a fridge in the car park giving away this ice-cold water?" Imagine you're surprised if the guy says, "Well, look, I saw the cooler, but this fishpond was closer, more convenient, and I was really thirsty." What would you think of such a person? Wouldn't you think he was crazy drinking from the fishpond when he could have had cool, clean, refreshing water?

But sadly, that's how many of us go through life, drinking from the fishpond. I know I've done that. I can still do it. I can still get drawn away from God's living water and find myself drawing from the stagnant fishpond. I know where the stagnant water is in my life. I know the places where I can go for refreshment that don't really refresh me. How about you? Where's the stagnant water around you? It could be an addiction, a relationship, an unhealthy ambition. It could be any number of things, but whatever it is, let's resolve to walk away from the stagnant water and pursue instead God's springs of living water. The Samaritan woman in this story recognizes that Jesus is the source of that living water and that that could refresh her.

And the story ends with her rushing back to her village to tell her friends about this amazing man that she's met. And there's a little detail in the story, and I always like the little details in the gospels because you wonder why they've stayed in. And this little detail is this. I think it's significant. It says that she left her water jar by the well when she went back to the village. She didn't need the jar anymore because she'd found the source of living water. When Jesus says to her, "The water that I will give you will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." She's not like the man we heard of last week, Nicodemus. Do you remember him when Jesus said, "You must be born again." He says, "Well, how do I climb back into our mother's womb?" There's none of that here. Nicodemus didn't get it. The Samaritan woman gets it. She doesn't say something like, "Well, where does that water come inside of me?" She simply says, "Give me this water. Give me this water."

St. Paul knew what it was to have this water. He describes it like this. "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Jesus talks of gushing. Paul talks of pouring. But the point is the same. We're not to be reservoirs of God's love. We're to be streams, streams that flow out from us, streams of living water that flow out through us to those around us. The Samaritan woman knew she'd come across something amazing and life changing, something truly wonderful. Of course, she left her jars behind. She was looking to drink deep from the source of living water. Life for her was transformed. After meeting Jesus, tasting those living waters, her priorities were different.

What might we have to leave behind to drink Jesus' living water? What are the things that we think will quench our thirst, but never do? Big questions to consider. So, I'll leave you three thoughts from this story. Jesus takes the initiative, he offers the Samaritan woman living water, an offer she takes up as she leaves her water jars behind. Amen.