

“Satisfying Satisfaction”

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John 4:5-15

100% satisfaction guaranteed. What does that mean to you? Perhaps you might recall a lawsuit from a few years ago when a fellow in Washington, DC sued his dry-cleaner for \$54 million dollars because the cleaners lost a pair of his pants. I guess he wasn't satisfied when they lost his pants! When I read about the amount he was suing his cleaners for I thought to myself that they must have been pretty special pants. They weren't. In fact the cleaners offered to buy him a new pair of pants to replace the ones he lost. But to the man who was suing, that just wasn't good enough. As a result, the man claimed that “Satisfaction Guaranteed” was deliberately misleading. The man ended up losing not only his pants but he lost the lawsuit as well. (I'm not sure if he lost his shirt.) The judge who presided over the case dismissed the charges because he said that something like satisfaction can be difficult to measure. It's not really quantitative. Moreover, not only is satisfaction difficult to measure but it can be hard for us to know period. I mean can any of us say with absolute certainty what it is in life that would satisfy us?

The quest for satisfaction is a daily endeavour. It begins when we get out of bed each morning. When you think about it, there isn't much we don't do, that doesn't have something to do with us wanting to feel satisfied.

That was the case with the woman at the well with whom Jesus speaks in our text. I don't know how easy it would be for many of us to imagine this scene where a Samaritan woman comes to draw water out of a well. It's just so far removed from our experience, especially in a country like Canada where water is so plentiful. We can turn a tap, unscrew a cap, or flip a switch and have more than enough water to satisfy our needs. However, when we read passages out of the Old or New Testaments, we must always remember that our Bible stories are about desert people who were bound by life-giving, life-sustaining water.

Getting the water was a part of a woman's daily work schedule. And water wasn't just anywhere, especially in the desert. As we hear in this text, the well that this woman is drawing from is the well of Jacob. It would have been in use for hundreds upon hundreds of years. Sources of water were guarded and treasured...they became a part of one's life and identity. This well is believed to have been located on the land that had belonged to Jacob, one of the fathers of the Jewish faith. It still exists today in the town of Nablus on the West Bank.

The daily chore of fetching water wasn't easy, but it was a necessary for survival. We all need water. When Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman and says, "Give me a drink," he is acknowledging their common need for water. Jesus thirsts, just as the Samaritan woman thirsts -otherwise she would not be coming to the well. Yet even though they share this common need, the woman is astonished that Jesus would even speak to her. She knows the history of animosity between Jews and Samaritans. She knows that, "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans." In other words, she and the container she used to carry her water would have been considered "unclean" to a Jew like Jesus. But Jesus isn't concerned with the fact that she is somehow different from him and drinks water from a different well -a different brand you might say. All Jesus wants to show here is that like her, he also thirsts. Jesus is attempting to find some common ground with that common thirst.

However, Jesus is also taking the conversation about water to a different place. He challenges the Samaritan woman to consider something more than the water in Jacob's well. That well offers the water that she had to return for day after day, because the need for water was one that was never satisfied. Jesus starts talking about a different kind of water, -Jesus offers "living water."

"Living water" was an established metaphor for something more than H₂O. In the scriptures, "Living water" evoked scriptural images from the wilderness wanderings of God's people when Moses brought forth water from the rock. It reminds us of the establishment in Canaan. It brings us to the words of the prophet Isaiah that promised a flourishing, fulfilled existence to a people that had faced exile. Living water had everything to do with God's power to satisfy the needs of the people. Living water was the presence of God's eternal spirit.

Suddenly the literal meaning of “water” and its temporal purposes is being turned into the metaphor for the eternal life Jesus is offering.

Jesus wants to offer this woman something else that she might embrace in her life, something that lasts forever. Jesus doesn’t do this to discredit the significance of Jacob’s well, but its physical limitations are exposed: those who drink of it “will be thirsty again,” says Jesus. The “water” Jesus offers, the “living water,” banishes thirst for good. There is an *eternal* dimension and an *eternal* satisfaction that Jesus is speaking about here. No refills are necessary when we receive the eternity that is given to us in Christ.

This isn’t the first time Jesus speaks about *eternity*. There is something about the realm of eternity that is central to the identity of Christ. Terms like “living water,” “everlasting life” and “eternal spirit” are ones Jesus uses time and again to describe who he is and what he represents. They are phrase that connect him to the eternal God. Furthermore, he connects others to that same God. Some people, upon hearing this might say something like: so what? It doesn’t matter if I accept Jesus’ invitation to receive life giving water. I don’t need Jesus to be satisfied. I don’t need God to be satisfied.

That’s true at one level. It’s true for most of us. Not unlike the way the woman was a solitary figure coming to the well seeking water day after day. These days pleasure seeking is mostly an individual exercise. Something we do isolated from society. It’s not that other people aren’t important, it’s just that many people in our world only see others as existing to serve their needs. Others exist for our individual experiences of satisfaction. But this type of human experience remains limited. It is diminished. It’s time sensitive. It’s temporal. Chances are you aren’t thinking about eternity when you’re chasing the day to day. Our concept of human flourishing of human fulfillment gets limited to our self and our schedule. As a result, our relationships only mean as much as we get out of them -when we are satisfied. Think about this: When we are no longer satisfied with someone or something, usually the relationship ends in our world. It’s a case of the well running dry.

How many relationships end when an individual is no longer satisfied? And I’m not just talking about romantic interests either. It could be any relationship where something happened and you never went back to that restaurant again, you never went back to that church again, or

you never went back to that store again, or you never went back to that person's house again. The list could go on and on and on. Something happened that left you less than satisfied and suddenly the relationship was over and done with. I know I've done it. I don't know if we really understand what happens in these instances but we really do make it all about ourselves and our own needs. And it's not that our needs don't matter, we have needs that we seek to fill. And we do have a responsibility to care for each other and love each other. There is that well that each of us needs to go back to in order to be filled up.

But when Jesus is speaking of living waters he is speaking from this perspective of eternity. Living water has to do with human flourishing that moves far beyond the scope of just my life or your life. That's what a view of eternity gives us. A view of a life that is far-reaching. This changes the way we use resources, the way we treat one another, the way we understand love.

You see, when we diminish love and a sense of satisfaction in selfish ways, we will never be happy or fulfilled. What ends up driving our living is the desire to be satisfied. But what happens if and when we achieve satisfaction? We fall into desire again. Or maybe we find ourselves conflicted, feeling satisfied and dissatisfied when we compare our "pleasure" to others. We can compare our "pleasures" to those of others and begin to envy them. That nice new Honda of your modest dreams sitting in your driveway can be a source of dissatisfaction when you see your neighbour's new Maserati. It's never good enough -even when we think we have achieved satisfaction. As Gratiano says in Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice", "All things that are, are with more spirit chased than enjoyed."

What can often happen is that whatever we have, we can end up being disappointed with because there isn't more. This is something philosophers call self-transcendence. In our imagination we are always putting ourselves beyond where we are and thus we are never satisfied. We are never happy where we are. Life will always be disappointing when we have ourselves as the only source of meaning and satisfaction. Life will remain deeply unsatisfying.

That is why our human striving can only find proper rest when we find joy in something infinite, something lasting, something greater than ourselves. For Christians this something is God. St. Augustine writes, "God is the only source to be found of any good thing, but especially

of those which make a person good and those which will make a person happy; only from God do they come into a person and attach themselves to a person.” We need things in this life that are eternal. God knows this. Jesus knew this when he spoke to the woman at the well and the woman at the well knew it too. We need the living water the life-giving water that connects us to the God-breathed spirit that has sought to animate our living from the very beginning in order to know a deeper goodness and happiness.

I believe that every now and then we have those moments of crisis in our lives, moments that are both great and small, when we are reminded that true human flourishing requires us to move beyond the language of our own lives to those things that are of eternal value. -Moments that move us beyond the concerns of our own day to day living, to consider instead the tapestry of relationships that God has woven us into. That’s when we start to see the power of faith at work. What would Boston look like this morning if people hadn’t worked together the way they did this past week? What would our world look like if people didn’t come together in communities like churches to be fed and sustained by the eternal truths that have guided humans for ages?

Would we flourish the same way? Just like a garden doesn’t flourish without water to sustain it, without the living water of eternity our spirits will dry and wither. We need eternity this is something the water of our Baptism helps to reminds us. Water has always been an important symbol in our faith and with good reason. I remember visiting ancient churches in northern Wales and noticed that they were often close to water. Baptisms happened on the banks of running rivers or spring fed wells. The people in the church gathered by the water together and they got wet together. Those who were immersed and those who watched from the river banks received the living water. In the Catholic Church tradition there has always been a small bowl of "holy water" available to worshipers as they enter the sanctuary. The faithful could dip their fingers in as they walked into worship they could make the sign of the cross on their forehead and remember their baptism, or take a symbolic "sip" from the stream of the eternal Spirit.

My friends, there is something deeply satisfying about knowing God has made a place for us in eternity. God gives us living water. Thanks be to God.