



Third Sunday of Lent



Ex. 17:3-7 • Rom. 5:1-2, 5-8 • John 4:5-42

Thirst can make us do strange things. When we are very thirsty, we begin to imagine things that aren't real, to see things that don't exist. People stranded in the desert sometimes see mirages—lakes of clear, fresh water that vanish as the wanderers reach their shores. Or an oasis with shady palms and a bubbling fountain that turns out to be a pile of rocks.

We all thirst for something, and it makes all of us do strange things. There's a place deep within each of us that thirsts for something. Some people thirst for love; we feel a longing deep within our hearts to be cherished by another. For some of us that thirst is so deep that it drives us in unhealthy ways—to seek out unhealthy relationships, to become co-dependent on another, to be unfaithful. Some people thirst for power—to be in control of situations and other individuals—and this makes us critical, angry and abusive. Other people thirst for pleasure, desiring possessions, or alcohol or drugs. But it all turns out to be a mirage. It never satisfies our thirst. In the end, we are still craving more love, more power, more pleasure.

Our Elect are just a few weeks away from the Sacraments of Initiation—Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. It has been a long journey; in reality, it's been a journey of their whole life. Something has drawn them to this point. They've recognized a thirst deep within themselves. The story of the Woman at the Well invites them—and all of us—to ask, "What are we thirsting for?"

It's a deeply symbolic story: its characters and images speak to us about what is really important in life. The woman is a symbol: she is not given a name because she symbolizes you and me. She is each one of us. She comes to the well looking for something, looking for a water that will quench her never-ending thirst. Jesus reminds her of this. He says to her, "Give me something to drink." He is human, too. He knows our thirst. But the woman is too preoccupied with her own need to be concerned about his, and she rebuffs him. That's what our deep inner thirst can do to us—turn us so inside ourselves that we become callous to the needs of others.

But Jesus says something amazing to her. "If you knew who it is who is speaking to you, then you would ask me for water." In other words he says, "You're looking for water in the wrong well... The water you've been drinking will never satisfy you. Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst."

Then Jesus reminds her that for much of her life she has been drawing water from the wrong wells. She's had five husbands, and the man she is with now is not her husband. We don't know the circumstances behind all this, and we don't need to—remember, the story is symbolic. Suffice it to say this woman has been through difficult times. She has been heartbroken again and again. And she's still thirsty. Jesus says to her, "You keep coming back to the same well. But the water is stagnant; it cannot satisfy your thirst. I have living water that can change your life. It will satisfy you to the point of overflowing; it will spring forth like a fountain: it can even become a source of life to others."

That is what baptism is all about. That is what the Elect will experience at the Easter Vigil when they step into the baptismal font. They will be immersed in living water, surrounded by living water, filled with living water to the very core of their being—and that water is the infinite, eternal, unconditional love of God. Because that is what each of us is really thirsting for—the perfect love of God. The baptismal font is the well of our salvation, where we are saved from the emptiness, the loneliness, the craving for power and pleasure that haunts us. In baptism each of us is immersed in God's love, or, as St. Paul writes in the second reading, "the love of God is poured into our hearts" to satisfy our deepest desires and needs.

Every time we enter the church and touch the font and bless ourselves, we should be reminded of Jesus' promise, "Whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst again. It will become a fountain within." God's love for you is unbounded. It can fill any emptiness inside you, overcome any addiction, any habit. It can alleviate any fear, forgive any sin, allay any guilt. The love of God is what we thirst for in the depths of our soul. But so often we seek it in the wrong places. We draw water from the wrong well.

St. Augustine wrote, “Our hearts are restless, O God, until they find rest in you.” We can spend our entire lives searching, but what we thirst for is right here. We have already received it. It is in the water of baptism. It is in the bread and cup of the Eucharist. Every week we are invited to be filled to overflowing with the love of God. Our thirst has led us to Jesus, the well of salvation. If we drink deeply—and often—we will never be thirsty again.

They are happy who,
putting all their trust
in the Cross,
have plunged into the
water of life.

early second century writing

For Reflection & Prayer

† Where have you experienced the life-giving water of God’s love in your life? Where do you need to experience it now?

† St. James exhorts us to “be doers of the Word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). What is one thing you can do this week to put the message of this Scripture into action?