

Thirsting for More
April 6, 2014
John 4:5-15, 19-26, 39-42

Last week our New Testament lesson was the story of Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus. This week we stay in John's Gospel moving on to the next chapter to listen to parts of Jesus' longest-recorded conversation with anyone: his chat with the unnamed Samaritan woman at the well¹.

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."

. . . 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."

¹ Fred Craddock. "The Witness at the Well." <<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=711>>

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."

. . . 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."

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. Ever Present One, help us to see and respond to you in the sunny early afternoon hours, in the moonlit hours of the late evening, and at any and every time of day and season of life. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

This morning I want to offer a history lesson: a lesson in the shifting nature of American spirituality since the 1950s. Don't worry. This isn't a doom and gloom account of the decline of Christianity or an attempt to idealize an earlier era. Instead, it is an effort to help give names to changes almost everyone here has lived through.

Robert Wuthnow, an esteemed sociologist who has taught for many years at Princeton where he also serves as the Director of their Center for the Study of Religion², wrote a book at the close of the twentieth century exploring spirituality in America since the 1950s.³

² Robert Wuthnow. CV. <http://www.princeton.edu/sociology/faculty/wuthnow/wuthnow_cv.pdf>

³ Robert Wuthnow. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (University of California Press, 1998).

He suggests the dominant spirituality in our country back in the 1950s could be characterized as a spirituality of dwelling. Church was at the center of society. In many places, churches were literally at the center of town. They were one of three pillars of stability along with small town life, and Americanism.⁴

This was the height of church building and expansion projects. These larger spaces were needed because increasing percentages of Americans were joining local churches.

People went to church – they traveled to a specific sacred place to encounter the divine. This is what a spirituality of dwelling is all about; it “emphasizes habitation: God occupies a definite place in the universe and creates a sacred space in which humans too can dwell.”⁵

The sacred space was intentionally different from other spaces. In worship the liturgy sought to connect Christians not only to God but also to other worshippers across the ages. Clergy wore attire that clearly differentiated them from everyone else. Parishioners wore their Sunday finest.

Church became a spiritual home. Increasingly churches offered activities beyond worship. These gave people a reason to come to church several days a week. The more social the sacred space, the more inclined people became to return again and again for fellowship with their spiritual family.⁶

Then came the 1960s – a decade of changes. In church life everything that had been taken for granted as unchanging started to change; Christian theologians declared that God was dead, and the Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council opened worship to parishioners in ways many had never imagined. At the same time the civil rights movement led to significant changes in the larger culture.

The 1960s and 1970s were an era when social structures and religious perspectives were questioned openly and often. This was a time when people were experiencing new freedoms. These shifts contributed to a shift from a spirituality of dwelling to a spirituality of seeking.

⁴ Ibid., p.27

⁵ Ibid., p.3

⁶ Ibid, p.34

In keeping with the way people navigated this new world, this new form of spirituality emphasized negotiation. Individuals actively searched for sacred moments as means of reinforcing their conviction that the divine exists. Such moments, however, tend to be short lived and infrequent. This means that seeking leads to more seeking and even finding what one seeks ultimately leads to more seeking. The more people know and the more they experience, the more they need to negotiate.⁷

When it comes to worship, seeker-oriented spirituality often led to a more casual overall experience with a blurring of the boundaries between the liturgy and everyday life. Some clergy dressed just like their parishioners and many worshippers no longer felt a need to dress up for church.

All of the negotiating and seeking led to an emphasis on special appearances of the divine or any type of miraculous means of confirming that the one we believe in still interacts with people in the present.⁸ Some of the more significant ways this new emphasis was realized include a new interest in near death experiences, a fascination with angels, and a focus on the inner self that led to a more therapeutic or even self-help emphasis.

This was also a time when postmodernism was becoming more mainstream; experience began to trump objective knowledge as the preferred way of making sense of the world around us. While this emphasis didn't fade, the world changed significantly as we moved from the twentieth century to the twenty-first century. During the time of Y2K and 9/11 we were starting to shift from a spirituality of seeking to a spirituality of practicing.

In place of the seeking that led to a consumer approach to the many spiritual options available in the marketplace, a spirituality of practicing demands more of the individual practitioner. It calls upon adherents to adopt a "more orderly, disciplined and focused approach to the sacred."⁹ For Christians this leads to a rediscovery of spiritual practices – something often referred to as spiritual disciplines.

⁷ Ibid., p.4

⁸ Ibid., p.139

⁹ Ibid., p.196

With this new type of spirituality, religious institutions - including churches - are facilitators that equip and empower people to go out into the wider world and do God's work.¹⁰ The role of clergy shifts yet again; they seek to model the practices, and to call upon people to live out their faith by practicing it any and everywhere life takes them.

Practicing can take many shapes. Since I don't have time to explore several, I will focus on the one dominant among young adults as a way of suggesting what may be mainstream for most in the near term future. In a more recent book dedicated entirely to understanding how 20 and 30 somethings are shaping the future of American religion, Wuthnow labels their dominant approach tinkering.¹¹

A spirituality of tinkering is necessarily an eclectic approach. Tinkerers are open to cobbling together resources or ideas from whatever sources they may encounter. Spiritual tinkerers tend to be incredibly resourceful.¹² They are pragmatic, focused, and able to navigate a world in which everything is always changing.

This overview is important because it tells a story we know well, but one that many have never taken the time to consider. These shifts also remind us that while the dominant culture continues to change some of us get left behind and continue to live our spiritual lives using a framework more commonplace in an earlier era.

As we travel back nearly 2000 years to the Gospels we enter a world in which people's spirituality was influenced by the larger culture. More importantly to my point this morning, however, is that your hearing of these stories is influenced heavily by your own primary form of spirituality.

The Samaritan woman appears in the Gospel because of her encounter with Jesus. If you stop and review the pages of the Gospels you will find they are filled with accounts of people experiencing Jesus. In just the stories of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman we find incredible variety.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.17

¹¹ Robert Wuthnow. *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 12.

¹² Ibid., p.14

- Nicodemus sought Jesus out. The unnamed woman was sought by Jesus.
- He was a person of power and privilege. She was at the opposite end of the spectrum: a nameless woman and a Samaritan.
- Nicodemus had an evening encounter to avoid being seen. The unnamed woman had a very public day time meeting with Jesus that could be seen by anyone and everyone.
- Nicodemus was a religious insider. The unnamed woman was an outsider in every sense of the word.
- He is reluctant to respond, and ultimately delays making a decision. She is capable of committing, and wholeheartedly embraces Jesus' offer.

An encounter with Jesus is something that we as people who follow the way of Jesus should not only imagine but also experience.

Don't worry if you don't fully understand.

Nicodemus certainly wasn't all that clear. He got quite confused when Jesus started talking about being born again and/or born from above. He was so perplexed that he asked follow up questions about how it was a grown man could re-enter his mother's womb into to be born again.

Don't worry if you don't fully understand.

The unnamed Samaritan definitely didn't get it at first. She had no idea what Jesus was offering. The Samaritan woman was confused about the origin and substance of something she had never heard of before – something Jesus called Living Water.

What matters about these stories is located in the desires expressed by a man and a woman alongside the provision they found in Jesus. Last week was about spiritual hunger. This week is about spiritual thirst.

It is no accident that a table has been set before us. The table is our opportunity to respond. We are all invited to this spiritual table; it is a table where the Bread of Life is waiting to satisfy your hunger and the Living Water is ready to quench your thirst.

This table is big enough for us all -

- for those who approach with a spirituality of dwelling or seeking or practicing or tinkering;
- for those who are spiritual but not religious
- for those who are post – post-modern, post-denominational, even post-Christian, and
- for those who don't fit well in any category.

The table has been prepared.

Jesus has offered an invitation.

Will you accept?