Book 10

Sunday March 22, 1981

"SATISFYING OUR THIRST" John 4:5-15, 19-26

Throughout human history, men and women have sought to claim superiority by reason of the pigmentation of their skin, the country of their birth, the size of their bank account, their social status, their sex or their religion. In the case of religion, people have claimed superiority by maintaining that they had a special relationship to God. Remember the statement last August 1980, by the Rev. Bailey Smith that "God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew." He must've forgotten about the Old Testament, and the New Testament for that matter.

The claim to superiority by virtue of one's religion is an old temptation. In the Old Testament of the Bible, the currents of religious exclusivism and universalism constantly oppose and interact. On one hand Jewish patriots urge the "special" status of Israel, her city of Jerusalem and her temple in that city. Jerusalem is the city of God and its Temple the special dwelling place of God--the Jews are children of Abraham and Sarah, especially chosen by God.

At the same time, we are reminded in the Old Testament that God is the Creator of all people. God's worshippers are not confined to Israel. The perfect and upright man Job, is not a Jew. In the book of Jonah, God takes pity on Nineveh and sends Jonah to preach a message of doom so that the city will be saved, and Jonah is surprised and angry that those people are saved. God's message is for everyone everywhere. God is the God of all people, and all human beings have equal value or worth in God's eyes. No one is superior or inferior.

In the ministry of Jesus in the New Testament of the Bible, the clash of universalism with exclusivism is heightened dramatically. Jesus is continually at odds with the religious establishment who act as if they have a monoply on God.

The good news of God's love which Jesus proclaims is for the whole world, not for just one group of people. "God so loved the world that God gave his Son." The ministry of Jesus Christ is to throw open the doors of God's community to everyone--the poor in spirit, the meek,

those who mourn, the outcasts, the peacemakers, the prostitutes, and sinners of every sort. Jesus was surrounded by crowds of common people. Religious leaders, resenting his popularity and inclusiveness, accused him of being a friend of sinners and tax-collectors, and his reply was scathing--"Truly, I say to you, the tax-collectors and harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you."

God's Kingdom is not the special province of any religious or social or ethnic or racial group. In the New Testament, Jesus heals the son of the centurion, a Roman, and in one of his most famous parables, gives the leading role to a good Samaritan. He heals a Samaritan leper. And in the Story read earlier this morning, Jesus engages a woman of Samaria in a conversation and offers her living water. His disciples are surprised that he is first of all talking to a woman, and secondly a Samaritan.

Jesus and his disciples had stopped at the well at the 6th hour, noon-time. The disciples went into the town to purchase food, and while Jesus waited, a Samaritan woman came alone to the well to get water. This in itself was unusual, for the natural time to get water was in the early morning or in the evening when the sun had gone down. It was then that all of the women of the town gathered at the well, and as they got their water, they heard and told the latest news.

We can assume that this woman came alone at noon because she had a bad reputation in town and thus the other women stayed away from her and she from them.

This time at the well she met a stranger, and he opened the conversation by asking her to give him a drink. She was surprised at the request. "How is it," she asked, "that you a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" No one had treated her with courtesy and dignity for a long time.

At the same time that Jesus was talking with the woman, he sensed an emptiness in her life and replied that although she was able to give him water to satisfy his physical thirst, it was really she who needed water of a different kind, living water, and that he could provide it for her.

But the woman didn't understand what Jesus was saying, or if she did, she didn't let on. We've all done that--

an inuendo or suggestion or offer is made and we pass it over. We go on talking as if we hadn't heard what was said.

Jesus, however was not side-tracked by her reply. He continued with his analogy and symbolism of water and let her know that the "living water" he was talking about was of a different nature, and that if she had it her whole life would be changed.

Now the woman became very interested, but if she understood what he was talking about, she didn't let on. Instead she gave him a kind of double answer. "Give me this kind of water," she said, "so that I may no longer thirst or have to bother to come here to the well to get water each day."

Again, Jesus listened to the feelings beneath her words. He knew that she was searching. He heard her saying, "I'm tired of my kind of life; tired of living with different men; tired of adultery; tired of trying to find meaning by having one husband after another; tired of being a social outcast. I pretend to be satisfied, but deep down I know that there is more to life that I now have. My life now is absurd. I am busy, but unfilled. I drink water, but another kind of thirst remains unsatisfied. I'm thirsty in more ways than you know."

We know the feeling. Outwardly we may appear satisfied, but deep down we may be lonely and unhappy, thirsty, but we have never said it plainly to anyone. Maybe we've never openly admitted it to God or to ourselves. Deep down, like the Samaritan, we've tried to fill the emptiness in our lives in other ways--through acquiring more knowledge, or gaining higher status, or changing jobs, or changing spouses, but we're still thirsty!

Jesus recognized this in the Samaritan woman. So he said to her, "Go call your husband and have him come here also." She answered honestly enough as far as she went, for she said, "I have no husband." But Jesus didn't leave the issue here, he said, "You are right in saying you have no husband, for you have had five husbands, and the man you are now living with is not your husband."

Now the woman was brought up sharply against the facts of her own life; facts which were unpleasant for her to face.

Why the woman had had five husbands and was now living with a sixth man, we do not know, and Jesus was not interested in the explanations or reasons. What he knew was that she needed to change her life here and now.

God has not made us as slaves to the forces around us. We can decide one way or another. We can change our behavior. We can, with God's help turn our lives around. Life can be pulled by goals which we consciously and deliberately choose, just as surely as it can be pushed by forces over which we feel we have no control. But the goals need to be adequate ones. Thus in the case of the Samaritan woman, Jesus tried to help her see the futility of finding happiness simply through the doorway of having one man and then another. She had been trying to fill the vacuum in her life with such behavior. And Jesus did not hesitate to make an issue of the matter.

The Samaritan woman knew she was facing a crucial decision in her life. This man Jesus was certainly a prophet. He had seen her problem immediately. But how does one go about changing? Where would she find forgiveness? How could she approach God?

So she asked Jesus, "Our fathers and mothers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship. Where then do I go for help? Since Jesus was a Jew, she expected to be told that Jerusalem was the Holy City and the only proper place to worship. It was an old argument between the Samaritans--"where is God to be found and worshipped?

The woman was also asking a deeper question--"Is God the God of all people? Is God's love and forgiveness for everyone? Can I find a new life in spite of my background?" "Is there some certain ritual or form which I must go through in a certain place before I can be forgiven?"

Jesus, being the sensitve and listening person he was, picked up her deeper question and moved it to another level. He in effect said to her, "You are seeking God and wanting to worship God and fill the emptiness in your life with God's Spirit--and you should know that God is also seeking you. God is not interested in whether you worship him on this mountain or in Jerusalem. God cannot be localized in any one place or in any one form of worship or another.

God is Spirit and they that worship God must worship in spirit and in truth."

By this time, the Samaritan woman could see that Jesus was interested in her as a person. The inner vacuum in her life was beginning to be filled. Later the woman rushed back into the village and told others to come with her to the well so that they too could meet this prophet. She told them, "I met a man who told me all that I had ever done." It was her way of saying, "God knows me!" And if God knows me intimately, if God connects with my life, then the whole world is to be seen in a new way.

So the story of the Woman of Samaria underscores the fact that God is inclusive. God hears the prayers of any human being. Unfortunately we are not ourselves always that inclusive in the way we treat and react to people. We Christians often like to build fences to keep people out. But we Christians do not control the market as far as God is concerned. We do not have a monoply on God. We are not God's managers with exclusive rights as to who comes into his presence, or into his Kingdom.

God's Spirit is available to each one of us and to all of us--that's the good news of this story. What God does with us is this: God takes individuals who see themselves as worthless and and inspires them to take responsibility for their lives and powers as never before. Jesus Christ was effective in getting people to act on the best that was within them, rather than the worst, and he can do the same for you and me.