

Deep Life

John 4:5-30, 39-42

March 12, 2023

First Presbyterian, Luling

This passage was the passage I preached on for my senior sermon in seminary. Don't worry; this sermon is new. It's long and it's complicated, and there are any number of directions a sermon could take. But every time it appears in the lectionary, the same verse intrigues me. Verse 14: Jesus is speaking, and he says "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." More specifically, that word that is translated "gushing" always catches my attention. More on that in a minute.

Let's see where we are and how we got here. This is the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well. It's a story that appears only in John, and comes right after last week's passage of Jesus's similarly lengthy encounter with Nicodemus. We're supposed to notice the contrasts: Nicodemus, a Jewish man of high status, approaches Jesus at night. This nameless woman, a Samaritan and thus automatically a person of low status, encounters Jesus in the middle of the day.

Jesus is headed to Galilee and goes through Samaria on the way. John says it was necessary. He could have avoided going through Samaria, and plenty of Jewish people did avoid doing so, but for Jesus it was necessary in a bigger sense—God so loved the *world*, and that world included the Samaritans, and so God's only begotten son needs to go to Samaria.

The woman approaches the well, and Jesus doesn't just ask her for a drink, but commands her to give him one. She points out right away that it's odd that he's even speaking to her, given all that separates them: gender, social status, and their religious differences. In this first section of their conversation, water is the subject, but Jesus is talking about water on multiple levels and it takes the woman a bit to catch up with him.

He needs water to drink, but he is the source of living water. She has what he needs, and he has what she needs. He's trying to explain what he means, that his living water is not just running water like a stream, but is life-giving, eternal-life-giving. That's when he says "Everyone who drinks of this water"—the water from the well—"will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I 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."

That's really quite an image, and it continues to catch my imagination. A spring of water inside us gushing up to eternal life. At John Knox Ranch, there's a swimming hole that is fed by a spring. According to some nature conservancy folks, that Blue Hole and the creek that flows from it are some of the most pristine water in the state. It's big and deep and cold and clear. There are fish and turtles and birds and bugs. Plants and huge cypress trees. There's a lot of life surrounding that living water. And there's a spring at the bottom, continually pushing up water from the aquifer, gushing far far under the surface.

Other things gush. Oil wells. Fire hydrants. If something is gushing, you can't stop it with mere human strength. Think about that leak in the gulf some years back, and how long it took to cap it off. Think about the tools firefighters have to use to stop the fire hydrant. Back in that seminary senior sermon, I used the image of what happens when you shake up a coke bottle and then take the top off of it. That's gushing that you can't stop. It just keeps coming, no matter how much of a mess it's making, or if you intended to shake it up or not.

That word translated here as "gushing" is not very commonly used in the New Testament. Only here in all of the gospels. And only two other places, both in the book of Acts, refer to people "leaping" up to walk, after they had been healed. (Acts 3:8, 14:10). Water leaping or gushing—it's definitely a lively image, an exuberant, active image.

So what in the world does it mean, to have a spring of water, gushing up to eternal life? We get a clue a few chapters later in John, in chapter 7. Jesus is back in Jerusalem, and the officials are already trying to arrest him, that is, death and the cross are already shadowing the story. But Jesus says "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" (7:37-38). Those who are filled with the living water themselves become rivers of living water.

Shift away from the oil wells, the fire hydrants, and the bottle of coke, and go back to the Blue Hole. That swimming hole is full of life, and it's surrounded by life, and it nourishes and nurtures more life as it creates a creek. Life gushes up and makes more life.

God is love, and so we are called to love God and neighbor. Jesus is living water within us, gushing up to eternal life, and that life then flows out of us. Divine love within us cannot be contained in us. It has to come out and be shared with the world. That eternal life, abundant life, cannot be contained in us. It too has to come out and be shared with the world.

The life that is gushing up in us, that cannot be contained, it comes out and is shared in all kinds of ways. It can be physical life: food that we share, water that we share, shelter that we share. It can be emotional life: listening to someone's troubles, calling someone when they are sick, sending a card to say "thinking of you." It can be spiritual life: praying for enemies, working to see someone very different as a child of God, seeking to have an attitude of openness to whoever God will send to you this day. It can be life that is shared with individuals, like most of my examples just now; or it can be life that affects whole communities of people, like working for laws to keep people safe and valued, or sharing life with a classroom of students, or serving refugees.

Life gushing from inside us cannot be contained by mere human effort, and it creates and nourishes and nurtures life wherever we go, and within whoever we encounter. That's what happened to the Samaritan woman at the well. At the end of the story, she leaves the water jar at the well and goes and tells all her neighbors about Jesus, the Messiah, the Savior of the world. The living water flows out of her and brings life.