

Essential Question #3:
Do You Need a Lasting Fulfillment?
John 4:7-26
March 15, 2020
North UMC

How many of you know what it means to ‘witch a well’ or ‘divining water?’ Witching a well is a pseudoscience of finding an underground aquifer to drill a well. Here’s how it works: Someone who has this gift walked around the grounds holding two L-shaped metal rods parallel—called vining rods—to each other. When they come to the spot where the well should be drilled to tap the underground water, the rods will cross each other—X marks the spot! My grandfather, it was claimed, could ‘witch a well.’ Soon after I was born, he gave my parents a plot of land on the family farm and he witched the well where Ernie English drilled. When I was in my first appointment and my parents moved, he walked around their new yard with two straightened coat hangers.

There was about as much science and even more tradition that went into Jacob’s Well where Jesus met the Samaritan woman. The origins of the well was nearly the only thing they had in common. As time went on his people, the Jews, and her people, the Samaritans, grew apart.

The tradition of the well was the only thing they had in common. Their differences went back about 400 years to the Exile when the Assyrians repopulated the region. The Jews saw the Samaritans as ethnically suspect. For the Samaritans, the rift went back to Eli who had usurped the high priest and set up an alternative place of worship. And so, the Samaritans said that Mt. Gerizim was the holy place of worship, not the Temple in Jerusalem. The Jews saw the Samaritan temple as nothing more than a front for pagan worship.

If ethno-religious differences were not enough, there was the gender rift. Men were not supposed to talk to women who were not family. As one ancient rabbi put it, ‘Men who talk with women bring evil upon themselves.’ And so a simple request like, ‘Give me a drink,’ is loaded.

But the well that their ancient ancestor had witched brought together a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman.

In the midst of this convoluted, contentious context God gives the gift of life. ‘Those who drink of my water will never be thirsty; the water I give will become a spring in them gushing with eternal life.’ Jesus is the revelation of God, and that revelation takes place not in the religious purity or the political correctness. Rather, God’s gift of life in Christ is experienced in this scandalous encounter that will challenge and undo 400 years of rivalry that has drained all of them of life. In Jesus, God is offering life to all. Jesus is the spicket of the gift of life for all, including and especially those who have been dismissed, discounted, and discouraged.

God offers us the gift of life now. God gives us the power to sustain us and energize us for the long, dry spells in our lives. God’s gift of life animates our lives like a water turbine generating electricity. And God fulfills the deepest longings of our lives. Because we were created in God’s image, only God can ultimately satisfy us. All our desires, all our needs are fulfilled by God giving us life. God’s gift of life fulfills us like a pool that is fed by deep springs always feeding it. God’s gift of life is the very presence of God in Jesus Christ. With his incarnation and carried on through the Spirit, the very life of God is in us.

We live and move and have our being in the very life of God. We are empowered and fulfilled by the God living in us. We are saturated with the very life of God through Christ and the Spirit.

For good reason, Jesus called God's gift of life the 'living water.' Like a stream in the desert that enables grasses and trees to grow along its banks, God's life nurtures our lives. Like a river through a town that sustains neighborhoods and industry, God's life empowers our lives.

That energy and fulfillment is forever. Because God is eternal, this gift of life never ends. Because it is an eternal gift, it is more than enough to satisfy our temporal desires. It is a source that never dries up.

Do you need a lasting fulfillment in your life today? She did. The traditions and ideologies that governed this woman were not giving her life.

And Jesus knew it. This is what he was doing when he changed the conversation to her marriages. 'Go call her husband,' he said. She said, 'I have no husband.' And he said, 'I know. I know you have had five and the one right now is not your husband.' Why all of a sudden does he point out her marital status? It has nothing to do with sexual immorality. This is not about being a divorcee or fornication. Rather, the conversation is about the ancient practice of Levirate marriage. According to Torah—which both Jews and Samaritans shared as holy writ—if a man died leaving a wife with no children to care for her, it was his brother's responsibility to marry her and care for her. As you can imagine, there were situations where the sister-in-law was an undesirable burden who got passed around from brother to brother and extended family. Her life was dependent upon a husband and in this case this woman had no husband to take on this responsibility. The system was not working. Not only was it not working to provide for her basic needs, even more so it was wearing her down emotionally. Just imagine how she felt. Her existence was precarious, her status was questionable, her reputation was tarnished. All that came with a toll: the constant wondering how she would make it, the perpetual self-doubt and second-guessing about what she should say and do in every situation, the grudging tolerance of her half-sisters and step-children. She suffers from the trauma of a legal system and cultural practice—a way of living, a life—that does not take care of her life.

And she will find no relief from her religious tradition. Arguments about which mountain to worship on and which old story to rely on, none of this solves the problem of her daily needs. Nor does the argument help the Jews or the Samaritan men. They all needed a lasting fulfillment to replace the constant drain.

Sound familiar? Do you need a lasting fulfillment? We live in relationships that tax our lives. We work in environments that drain our energy. We need a source of life that will keep filling us faster than these daily depletions.

Do you need a lasting fulfillment? This is a different question from last week. Last Sunday, the key question was about whether you need a new life. This Sunday, the question is whether you need a satisfaction in your life. Do you need a source of renewal that truly satisfies you?

Because our lives are constrained and draining, we go seeking fulfillment from other wells. We drop our buckets down in

- The wells of consumption—Have you ever gone shopping just to make yourself feel better? You don't really need it, but it makes you feel good. Consumer therapy. The global economy is based

on this. By the very nature of capitalism, that desire can and should never, ever be fully satisfied. If it was, you would never buy it again and the entire global economic system would collapse.

- The wells of pleasure—We seek a jolt of life from our experiences. For some, it is the thrill of a sporting event. For others, the pleasure of a concert or a movie. For some, it is sex. None of them are wrong or bad in and of themselves, but they can never fully satisfy us. They become destructive idols.
- The wells of addiction—We seek fulfillment in alcohol, drugs, pornography, hatred, and gambling. Inseparably woven into the psychological and physiological dynamics of addictions is the spirit. There is a misdirected longing for the fulfillment that the image of God in us seeks from the source of that image.

In all these useless attempts to find a lasting fulfillment, we are just walking around the yard with a couple of wires hoping that they will cross and mark the spot.

All these dried-up wells require us to be dishonest with ourselves and never touch our true selves. The shopping, the pleasures, the vices never touch our deepest longings. Instead, they deal with distortions of that deeper need. They are misdirected and end up dealing with the symptoms rather than the root cause. In turn, because we are misfocused we never come to terms with what is really going on in our lives. Even deeper, they cannot satisfy us because they are based on something we are not. They feed the façade, the mask we wear, rather than attend to our true selves. And yet, we look to all this stuff like a god we worship, a god we trust to save us. We worship them in our bodies and our worship is lie about ourselves and to ourselves.

We receive Jesus' living water by worshipping God 'in spirit and truth.' What does it mean to worship 'in spirit and truth?' There is something God does in worship and something we do in worship.

On God's side, we worship in the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit surrounds us and saturates us with life as we worship. The Spirit connects our spirits with one another as we worship. It does not matter where you are sitting right now—at the end of the pew or in your home—God bridges our social distancing with spiritual intimacy. When we are surrounded, saturated, and sew together by God in worship, the Holy Spirit reveals truth to us. The Spirit shows us the truth about all those false forms of satisfaction, the idols, we have been worshipping so that we can find our true fulfillment through Christ.

On our side, we participate in God's Spirit and Truth, when we worship in spirit and truth. For us to worship in spirit means that we are attentive to the Holy Spirit. We are receptive to the Holy Spirit. Worship is not about where are bodies are, it is about where our spirits are. To worship in spirit is an approach to worship. It does not matter where your body is right now; it matters where your heart is. You can be sitting in this sanctuary staring at me, but if you are not attentive to the Holy Spirit, then you might as well be on the moon. To worship in our spirits is to be attentive and receptive to God's Spirit who is in us and around us.

To worship in truth means that we are honest before God and ourselves. Worship is an attitude. To worship in truth demands that we open ourselves to the Spirit. We become vulnerable to God. We surrender our sins and our illusions to God.

Through worship we receive that lasting fulfillment of the living water.

Our lives should be like a chapel built on a hot spring, which is exactly what Odo of Metz did for Charlemagne. In the 780s Emperor Charlemagne established his palace at Aachen, in what is now Germany, which is known for its hot springs. Apparently, Charlemagne and his father, Pippin the Third, were well-known swimmers and thus the location. The Emperor hired Odo of Metz to oversee the construction of the palace chapel. Odo built it on the site of an earlier chapel which had been built directly on top of an ancient Roman springs.

Build your week by worshiping in spirit and truth. Each day and several times a day, pause of a moment and inhale as you say to yourself, 'spirit.' Envision the Holy Spirit surrounding you and saturating. Become aware that the Spirit is connecting you with others. Then, exhale and say to yourself, 'truth.' Be honest with God in that moment. Let God have all your failures, your sins, the lies you have told yourself. Become vulnerable in the presence of the Spirit so you can truly receive the Spirit.

This week, let us dig down through the archeology of our lives and discover the living springs of God's Spirit. Let us live each day as an act of worship, attentive and receptive to the Spirit, humble and vulnerable to God who fulfills our lives.