

# **The Ones with the Bucket**

John 4:3-42

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27 March 2011

Listen to these thoughts on this gospel passage from professor of preaching Anna Carter Florence:

There is something beautifully simple in the staging of this scene as well as its premise: Jesus is thirsty at the well, and we are the ones with the bucket. The deeper metaphorical conversation that follows makes no sense until we really take this in. Can a little thing like a cup of cool water, offered in love, be the beginning of a salvation journey? Yes; and we will never know until we meet the stranger, and tend to the human need first.

Now, most sermons on this wonderful story from the Gospel of John focus on Jesus providing living water to those of us who are thirsty for it. I've preached that sermon before. And it is part of this story. But notice, as Anna Carter Florence has pointed out, that the story begins with Jesus as the one who is thirsty, and we are the ones with the bucket.

So, the beginning of this great, good news story is an act of hospitality in which we encounter the Christ in a stranger. And it is this encounter, facilitated by this act of hospitality, which sends living water flowing through us.

This Lent we are focused on spiritual and communal practices of caring for one another. And today I want to talk about hospitality as an act of care. Let's begin by exploring further this water image in the text and how that connects with hospitality, and I'll conclude with some practical reflections on this spiritual discipline -- some opportunities for practicing hospitality this Lent.

Stephen D. Moore, of Drew University, in a commentary on this story, also focuses on Jesus' desire. It is Jesus who is thirsty, looking for something to satisfy that thirst. Moore asks us to consider the other time in the Gospel of John when Jesus is thirsty and asks for a drink. It is at the cross. During his crucifixion, Jesus is thirsty and asks for a drink, and the Roman soldiers provide him a sponge soaked in vinegar. Stephen Moore writes, "The reader arrives at the cross, then, only to be returned, in effect, to the well, carried by the current of a stream. . ."

Since all of Lent is something a preparation for the cross, it is intriguing to me to consider how the crucifixion story might connect with the stories in the Sunday's leading up to Holy Week. So, what other connections might there be between the story at the well and the story of the cross?

Moore thinks that water and thirst are the connecting images. After Jesus tastes the

sponge of vinegar, he states, "It is finished," and dies. At this point the soldiers pierce his side and blood and water flow. Moore points out that the presence of the water is strange and that attempts to literally and medically explain it miss the important metaphorical and theological meaning that the flow of water is trying to direct us to.

Back at the well Jesus told the Samaritan woman that "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." Moore contends that the water flowing from the side of Jesus after his death is to direct us to the living water Jesus spoke about at the well.

Relevant to our interest in the practice of hospitality are a couple of different implications he draws forth from this analysis. One is that the material order is a "necessary precondition that enables the Spirit . . . to come into being for believers." At the well, the spiritual experience of living water is made possible through the act of sharing the physical water. And at the cross, because Jesus' physical body took on the wounds of death, the Spirit is set loose in the world.

In the same way, the Holy Spirit can be set free to work in our lives and in the lives of those we encounter through the physical actions we perform. In sharing water with the thirsty or food with the hungry, we enable the Spirit to come into being. In providing a place here in this building for people to pray and worship and learn and fellowship with one another, we provide a place for the Spirit to come into being. When hurting people come off the street in order to find a place of peace and quiet, we have, through our hospitality, enabled the Holy Spirit in its work by simply providing this building.

The other implication for our consideration of hospitality is that the moving, living water flows through Jesus and flows through us. We don't simply drink of this living water, fulfilling our own individual needs, the living water fills us up and continues to flow out of us, filling the needs of others. Jesus himself says this in the story, "That water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." Stephen Moore states it this way:

Rivers of living water can also be said to flow out of the believer, then, -- . . . The believer is more than a mere receptacle for surplus water . . . rather, he or she is a channel, or conduit, in his or her own right.

The stranger comes to us, thirsty, and we provide water. That stranger then provides spiritual, living water for us. In that act we recognize the presence of the Christ in the stranger. And the water shared with us flows through us benefiting others.

Our acts of hospitality create moments for the Spirit to work. Acts of hospitality and care also become ways the Spirit flows through us. Just as Jesus became a channel of life and blessing and good news for us, we become channels of life and blessing and good news for others.

The role of hospitality as a life-sustaining spiritual practice has also been emphasized in the theology of African women. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a scholar from Ghana, in her book *Introducing African Women's Theology* devotes an entire chapter to "Hospitality and Spirituality." In the African context, the connection between hospitality and life has been very important. Here is what Oduyoye says:

“Offering and receiving hospitality is a key indication of the African emphasis on sustaining our life-force at all costs, both as individuals and as communities. Life is our most valuable asset, so preserving life and prolonging life is a way of life in Africa. “

But she goes on to point out a paradox in this African practice of hospitality:

“The paradox is that this makes us vulnerable. Hospitality is built on reciprocity, openness and acceptance, but to open one’s self to the other is always a risk. . . . It is an opportunity for a revelation, an epiphany of the as yet unknown and thus unexperienced.”

Oduyoye helps us realize how the riskiness of hospitality – the worry that we can be taken advantage of, the danger of crossing cultural boundaries between groups of people or, even that the stranger we welcome might do us harm – that this very riskiness of hospitality is one reason it can become a powerful, spiritual, life-sustaining event open to revelation and epiphany.

But it is not just because of the potential for blessing that we engage in hospitality, we do it because this is God’s will. It helps to make the reign of God real upon the earth. Oduyoye, following our water theme today, says that the theological reflection on hospitality is rooted in our baptism. She writes,

“Our baptism into Christ compels us to see a new humanity, free and tuned into mutual sharing of gifts and a sustaining community.”

Every stranger we encounter, then, is a potential sister or brother in the new humanity that is God’s will. This resonates with the idea we mentioned earlier that in every stranger we have the potential to encounter the Christ.

So, to draw these threads together. Every act of hospitality is:

- A chance to encounter the Christ in other people.
- An enabling of the work of the Holy Spirit.
- An opportunity for living water to flow through us. A chance, therefore, for us to be like Christ to others.
- A life-sustaining activity.
- A risk with the possibility of revelation and epiphany.
- A fulfillment of our baptismal vows to create a new human community.

Wow! Now that is a lot of theological substance all wrapped up in the pretty simple act of sharing a drink of water from our bucket.

What then are some practical ways we can engage in hospitality this Lent?

Well, one new venture of this congregation is to become involved in the weekly

Saturday lunch that the churches in our neighborhood have come together to provide for the people who live around us. This meal is served every Saturday at First Baptist Church, but a handful of different churches work together to make it happen. That group of churches and neighbors calls itself Neighbors United. And I like how they understand their purpose. It is not simply to provide a service for people in need. The real purpose of the group is to build long term relationships and partnerships with the people living around us.

Rick Brenneman, the chair of our Congregational Outreach Ministry, spent the last three weeks at the Saturday lunch seeing how it works. He has decided to form a new Community Meal Team so that we at First Central can begin providing the lunch on occasion. Last week Rick spoke about his passion in worship and wrote about it in this week's church newsletter. Here is some of what he wrote,

This was a really warming experience, having the opportunity to provide a hot meal for around 180 of our neighbors . . . who were truly grateful for our efforts. . . . [This] gave me the opportunity to cook for and serve our neighbors, which fits perfectly the mission that we as a congregation defined among our priorities in our self-examination last year.

Then, last week, Rick asked those of you who were interested in helping to form a team and serving the meal to meet him after church. Fifteen people showed up! And they decided that we would provide the meal four times a year. If you are still interested in knowing more about this project or are interested in getting involved, please see Rick after church. And if you don't know who he is, I'll introduce you.

Another opportunity for hospitality this Lent will come in April during our Spring Cleaning. This year we have scheduled three different work days during which we will clean and prepare our building for Easter. Those work days are next Sunday, April 3 after church; Saturday, April 9, from 1-4 p.m.; and Saturday, April 16, from 9 a.m. till noon. We tried scheduling a variety of days and times so that hopefully everyone would have a chance to participate.

And I am hoping that everyone who is able will participate in at least one of these work days.

We'll be doing all sorts of things – cleaning rooms, throwing away junk and clutter, organizing the sacristy, polishing wood here in the sanctuary, and more. A variety of projects for different skill levels and ages have been organized. We hope that families with children will come and work together on projects. This can be one of our intergenerational events.

You might notice that in order to demonstrate what we plan to do, Sam Pfeiffer has only polished half of the wall here behind the chancel platform. Half this wall is shiny and the other half is a little dull. Just imagine the sparkle when all the wood is polished and in great shape.

Now, why worry about how our building looks, about how it is decorated, about how it is cleaned? We should be concerned about these things not because they make the church building more comfortable for us, but because this building is itself part of our mission and ministry to this community and to people in need. And keeping it clean, inviting, and beautiful are acts of hospitality.

On a recent Wednesday night we had over 60 folk using our parlor as part of an alcohol

recovery program. Some of them showed up early to walk our labyrinth. That same evening we had our Lenten study in Memorial Hall and choir rehearsal going on in the choir room downstairs. There was also a group from one of the corporate offices over here playing basketball in the gym.

But it isn't only the groups of people. About two weeks ago a woman came to the office door one day and asked to talk with a pastor. We went to my office and sat down and through tears she told me that she had just had a fight with her husband and had walked out of their house. She said as she walked along the street, she looked up and saw our church building and knew that if she went there she'd find a moment of peace and someone to pray with her. And that's what we did.

Yes, maintaining this building is an act of ministry and hospitality. So I hope you'll plan to join us sometime in the next few weeks for the spring cleaning.

And beyond these opportunities, I hope you will find the moments in your own life for sharing the gift of living water with a stranger. "Jesus is thirsty at the well, and we are the ones with the bucket."