

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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The Well of Vulnerability

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Grace and peace to you from the One who is already here, already reaching toward us, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Picture the hottest day of the year. You're walking along a dusty roadside, sun pressing down, mouth dry as bone. Every step feels heavier, each breath a reminder of how thirsty you really are. There's a moment when you finally reach a water faucet, or a well, or even just a shaded spot, when all the else disappears. In that moment, only one thing matters: the need we all share to be filled, to be helped, to slake our thirst.

There are some things that level us, no matter our politics, our upbringing, our education, our zip code, our confidence, or even our faith. Thirst will level you. Weariness will level you. Grief will level you. Fear will level you. The kinds of realities you cannot talk your way out of, because they live in the body, the nervous system, the ache you carry behind your ribs; these things will all level you.

This may be an uncomfortable truth, but then again, Lent is a season that refuses to let us pretend. It draws us back into the honest places. Into dust. Into hunger. Into tears. Into the truth that we are not self-sufficient.

That's why this Gospel reading feels both challenging and gentle. Jesus meets a woman at a well, and their meeting shows what the gospel can do: not just share information or settle arguments; but open the door to relationship across differences through shared vulnerability. And not vulnerability as a feeling or a show; it's real and it's about need. It's the truth that all of us depend on God and on each other.

John tells us that Jesus comes to a Samaritan city and sits at Jacob's well. It's noon, the hottest part of the day, and Jesus is tired. That detail is important. We often picture Jesus as always calm and in control, but John makes it clear: he is worn out and thirsty, sitting outside without shelter, rope, or bucket, next to a deep well.

Then a woman comes to get water, and Jesus simply says, “Give me a drink.” It’s a short request, but it carries some real risk. There are significant barriers between Jews and Samaritans: centuries of hostility, religious and ethnic prejudice, and debates about who truly belongs. Gender adds another layer: she asks, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a **woman** of Samaria?” Even she is surprised by his boldness.

I love that the text doesn’t pretend the differences aren’t there. Jesus doesn’t say, “Let’s just forget all that.” The woman doesn’t pretend it’s fine. The divide is named and right in the heart of their difference, the tension is laid bare: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” The air is thick with everything unsaid too.

For a breath, it could have ended there. But then, and this is something of a miracle, the conversation continues. Jesus doesn’t bulldoze her. He doesn’t humiliate her. He doesn’t reduce her to an object lesson. He stays. He engages. He asks. He answers. He listens. And the exchange becomes something more than argument. It becomes encounter.

Notice that it starts not with Jesus showing power, but by admitting he needs help. He is thirsty, tired, and has nothing to draw water with. The well is deep. In other words, Jesus comes to this foreign woman not as someone invincible or in power, but as someone in need.

I wonder if you can recall a moment, even just this past week, when you found yourself in that same place: standing at the edge of your own limitation, aware that you didn’t have what you needed to move forward. Maybe it was a problem too hard for you to solve alone, a conversation you didn’t know how to start, a time when you reached the end of your resources, patience, or hope.

Then, as often happens with Jesus, the conversation shifts to a deeper level and a deeper kind of thirst. He talks about “living water,” not just water for the body, but water for the soul, water that becomes “a spring...gushing up to eternal life.”

But even here, the story refuses to split the world into “spiritual things” and “physical things” like they’re unrelated. Jesus’ promise of living water is not a denial of bodily thirst; it is an honoring of it. The water that sustains the body and the water that sustains the soul are entangled, because they are entangled in people.

I think of the way the need for water or food brings people together. Even right now somewhere, at this very moment, maybe in a church basement or people sharing bowls of soup at a shelter, there are people gathered together for food. Some come hungry in body, others hungry in spirit, but sitting side by side, drawing warmth from the meal and the presence of others, it is hard to draw a line between physical and spiritual hunger. Both are real; both press in for attention; both are met by the same simple mercy: a meal, a welcome, community and connection at the table. In both the ancient story and our daily lives, the human need for water and the deeper thirst for connection breaks us open to one another.

Then comes a tough moment: Jesus says, "Go, call your husband." She replies, "I have no husband." Jesus answers, "What you have said is true." For a long time, many have used this moment to shame her, turning her into a cautionary tale or a "sinful woman."

But listen to the response Jesus chooses: not condemnation, not disgust, not a sermon at her expense, just truth met with acknowledgement – "What you have said is true." It can sound like judgment if we're determined to make it judgment. But it can also sound like what so many of us hunger for: to have our reality named without being crushed by it. To have our story acknowledged without being turned into gossip. To have someone stand in the hard place with us and say, "I see it. I'm not looking away. And I'm still here. I'm still with you."

Maybe you know what it is to carry a truth that feels too heavy to speak aloud. Maybe you have wondered if your own story would be met with understanding or with shame. Like her, we come with what is real: our fears, our failures, our longing to be seen for who we truly are. In this moment, can you imagine Jesus meeting you there, not with accusation, but with gentle recognition and grace? His words invite us not to compare or judge but to stand together, shoulder to shoulder, in the light of honesty and mercy.

And what happens next? She doesn't shrink. She doesn't disappear. She becomes bold. She becomes a witness. She leaves her water jar, she leaves the task she came for, and she runs to the city saying, "Come and see..." This woman, this outsider, this "other," becomes the first evangelist in John's Gospel.

From outsider to evangelist, what a great reversal. She becomes the one who brings others to Jesus. And the Samaritan community receives him. They invite him to stay. Two days. Relationship. Table fellowship. Proximity. This is what mutual vulnerability can do; it can become the crack in the wall where grace gets in. Remember her story, from outsider to evangelist.

We have to admit that there are walls in our world today that feel just as unbreakable as those between Israelites and Samaritans. Many of us feel deep grief and anxiety when we see the news: conflict growing, civilians suffering, children hurt, families forced to leave home, entire regions thrown into chaos. And when war breaks out, when leaders speak, when commentators and social media react, something often changes in the way we use language.

People turn into abstractions. We use words that keep suffering at arm's length: "targets," "assets," "operations," "strikes," "retaliation," "regime," "collateral damage." But what does that last phrase mean, really? "Collateral damage" sounds clean, almost technical. In reality, it may be a boy lying in the rubble with a bloodied bandage pulled tight around his leg, a mother screaming for her child who will never again move.

These words, whether used to justify or defend against violence, can make real people vanish from our minds. When people disappear from our language, they disappear from our imagination. And when that happens, it becomes too easy to accept their suffering as unavoidable, deserved, or not our problem.

But the gospel won't let us do that. The gospel insists there are no faceless people, no one who can be thrown away, no "mere civilians," and no children who are "collateral damage." There are only human beings, loved and made in God's image. Each has a name, a story, a body that can bleed, people who love them, and their own thirst, weariness, grief, and fear.

So here is the bridge the text builds for us. Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well, and he refuses the easy script that says: avoid her, dismiss her, use her, win the argument, prove superiority. Instead, Jesus chooses the harder way, to see a person. And the church is called to the same work: to see the person beyond the label.

Jesus shows us what it means to see people. To remember that people in Iran are not a monolith. They are not an idea. They are not interchangeable with any government or military force. They are human beings, parents trying to protect their children, students trying to plan a future, elders trying to live long enough to see peace, ordinary neighbors trying to get clean water and medicine and bread. They are people who are terrified when bombs fall. People who mourn when loved ones don't come home. People who are simply trying to survive another day.

It is important to acknowledge that real-life conflicts and suffering are shaped by complex histories, shifting alliances, deeply entrenched grievances, and political decisions that rarely offer easy solutions. The suffering we see cannot be explained away or addressed by simple answers, and the path to true peace often winds through difficult territory. This is not a political statement. This is a gospel statement. Because the gospel says: realities of need cut through the political barriers constructed to keep us from building the Kingdom and Kin-dom of God. Need exposes what we share. Not that we are exactly the same, but that we are human. That we are vulnerable. That we belong to God. That we require mercy.

Once you truly see others as human, it's much harder to speak about them with contempt. You can't take pleasure in their pain, dehumanize them, or pretend that God only cares about "our side." At the well, Jesus' thirst becomes a doorway. What if our grief could do the same? Not a doorway into naïveté. Not a doorway into pretending evil doesn't exist or that justice doesn't matter. But a doorway into refusing hatred. A doorway into refusing cruelty. A doorway into refusing the lazy, addictive practice of turning whole peoples into enemies we no longer have to love.

Jesus didn't wait for people to be safe or convenient to love. He loved across divides. That love created community, testimony, a crack in the wall, a shared table, and a glimpse of what God wants for the world.

So here is the invitation today. Let your vulnerability connect you, not isolate you. If you know what it is to be afraid, then stand with those who are afraid. If you know what it is to mourn, then stand with those who mourn. If you know what it is to feel powerless, then stand with those who feel powerless. If you know what it is to be thirsty, in body or soul, then stand with the world's thirst. Let what you have known in your own life move you not just to feel, but to act, to cross the distance, and to stand beside others in compassion.

And then, as Christ's people, let's take up some simple, holy practices: We pray for peace, real peace, not propaganda peace. We mourn lives lost on all sides of conflict, because every death is a wound in God's creation. We resist rhetoric that dehumanizes, at the dinner table, on social media, in casual conversation, even in our own hearts.

We ask God to keep our compassion alive, even when the world tries to wear it down. At Jacob's well, Jesus shows us a deep truth: the well is deep, and none of us has everything we need alone. But there is living water, mercy that meets us in hard times, and a Savior who sits down, tired and thirsty, and starts with a request, not a weapon: "Give me a drink." In that shared vulnerability, God begins to turn enemies into neighbors. May it be so among us. Amen.