

“A Thirst for the Kingdom”

Sermon by The Rt. Rev. Barbara C. Harris, this version preached at Historic St. Thomas Church for Women’s Day, as published in Hallelujah, Anyhow! A Memoir, by Barbara C. Harris with Kelly Brown Douglas (Church Publishing Incorporated, 2018). Reproduced here, with publisher permission pending, by the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts as reference material for March 13, 2021, commemorations of Bishop Harris’s life and witness.

In the name of God: Creator, Liberator and Sustainer. Amen.

Good morning, church. What a joy to be with you on this special Sunday and I am honored by your kind invitation to join in this annual observance of Women’s Day.

I want to call your attention to a familiar story from Scripture found in the fourth chapter of the Gospel according to John. We find there an interesting encounter that begins with a little verbal sparring match between our Lord and a woman who has come to draw water from the well of Jacob. As we try to put this encounter into some focus and some context, I ask you to think with me on the subject, “A Thirst for the Kingdom.”

As I reflected on this passage of Scripture with its detailed encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, I was mindful of the fact that we usually hold up as examples women of unquestioned character, unblemished reputation, and solid achievement, especially on a day such as this when we celebrate women of legacy, faith, and hope. And certainly many quickly come to mind, not only from the pages of Scripture, but from everyday life as well. We tend to focus on the virtues of womanhood and, again, almost everyone here could extol these. Moreover, we tend to highlight strengths rather than weaknesses, fine points rather than faults, and sterling qualities rather than sins. We usually hold up the “perfect,” but in this text we learn something from the “imperfect.”

Jesus, on his way from Judea to Galilee, is passing through Samaria. He is passing through unfriendly territory. The rivalry between Jews and Samaritans was well known; it had existed from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Jews and Samaritans had serious theological differences. Jews didn’t think much of Samaritans, for Samaritans had profaned the sacred altars of the Jews by letting pigs run loose through the temple. In fact, to the Jews, Samaritans were not only unclean, they were barbaric. That is why the disciples and others were shocked when Jesus used the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate his answer to the question: “Who is my neighbor?”

They also were caught up short by the story of the cleansing of the ten lepers; the only one who returned to give thanks was a Samaritan. The Jews could not believe that Jesus would use a Samaritan as a good example of anything.

So it is odd that, although weary from his journey and the midday heat, our Lord would stop to rest in this hostile place. Most of us would try to get through hostile territory and on to familiar or neutral, if not safe ground as quickly as possible. But Jesus, as on so many occasions in his life and ministry, chooses an odd place to stop and to witness to the glory and the love of God. And he stops in the odd places of our lives.

It was not unusual, however, that Jesus—who often broke with tradition—would request water, even from a stranger, even from a member of an enemy group, even from a woman. Water was life-

sustaining in that parched and barren land. His disciples, we are told, had gone off to buy food. But even though one could survive without food, one could not go for long without water. And his request was one that would not be denied, even from a sworn enemy. Life was much more simple in that time; there were just certain things you did not deny people. Scripture was very clear on hospitality to strangers. So Jesus says to this woman with her water jar, “Give me a drink.”

But our Lord is after more than just water. Jesus, resting at this fork in the road between Judea and Galilee, in the course of his journey to his ultimate earthly destination—Jerusalem and Calvary—also is at a spiritual crossroads. His mission is coming full cycle as he makes his tortuous journey that culminates in our salvation. And he is about to do something he has not done before. Here he reveals to this woman of the hated Samaritans, this woman of questionable repute, something he has refrained from revealing to others who might be regarded as more worthy of his attention. Jesus reveals to this woman in no uncertain terms that he is the Messiah.

There have been other occasions up to this point on which the Father’s glory has been shown through the Son and on which he carefully had told others that it was not yet time to lay out the full story. At the wedding feast at Cana of Galilee where he turned water into wine, he told his mother his hour had not yet come. And like a mother who knows there is something special about her child, she said—“all right, son” and she told the wedding hosts “just do whatever he tells you.”

Again, on the Mount of Transfiguration, where he was caught up between Moses and Elijah and shone forth in radiant dazzling beauty, he cautioned his disciples to tell no one of what they had been privileged to see. He gave similar warnings in some of his miracles of healing. Yet here at this crossroads, he makes himself known to this woman.

As if to further document his revelation, he goes on to tell this woman about herself. He blows her cover as if to reinforce the truth that before God, the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed.

It shocks us when somebody sees through us and discovers what we would rather keep hidden. We go to great lengths to try to cover up our secrets and our faults. We make sure we are seen with the right people in the right places at the right time; we join the proper organizations and institutions, including the church. Well, we may be able to fool our friends and neighbors, but we can’t fool Jesus!

It is human nature to try to cover up the unflattering, the unattractive, the uncomfortable things about our lives. At first the woman at the well tries to be cagey. She tries to dodge the question and the issue. “Go and get your husband,” Jesus instructs her. “Sir,” she says, “I have no husband.” “Right on,” says Jesus, and proceeds to detail her liaisons and her indiscretions. “You’ve had five husbands and the man you have now is not your husband.” Imagine our reaction if personally confronted that way by Jesus today; as our elders might have said, “now look here Jesus, you done left off preaching and gone to meddling!” She also challenges him when he says, “if you knew who you were talking to and what God is offering you, you would be the one asking ‘give me a drink.’ And He would give you living water.” “Are you greater than our father Jacob who gave us this well?” she asks. But Jesus stays right on the case. “Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whosoever drinks of the water I shall give will never thirst.”

Ultimately this woman realizes that she is conversing with someone different, someone special, somebody with something to offer, someone who could make a difference in her life. And that’s what Jesus is all about—making a difference in our lives, helping us to emerge into our full stature as children of God, not only women, but *people* of legacy, faith, and hope.

I think there are some clear messages for us in this strange story of the woman at the well: messages for us as we stand at our individual and personal crossroads and ponder the choices of life in a vain world that is no friend to grace; messages as we consider ourselves as emerging people of Christ's kingdom; messages for us as we realize, as did the woman at the well, that while we are not yet what we should be, thank God, we are not what we were. We are different because God has touched our lives, different because we realize we can learn from all of God's people, even from folk like the Samaritan woman—a street woman if you will.

No matter what you think of the Samaritan woman, a fact—and an important fact—is that *she was at the well*. She was there where Jesus was. Had she not gone to the well when she did, she would not have been privileged to meet and have an encounter with the Savior.

No matter her reason for going at the odd hour she went (and scholars tell us she didn't go at the usual time, at the early dawn or in the cool of the evening). She went in the burning heat of the day when the sun was scorching, when everybody else was looking for some shade or for some relief from the midday heat. No matter her reason for going at that hour, she was at the right place at the right time. If you don't go near the well, you cannot draw up water. You must make yourself present and available to receive the living water God so freely gives. You must go to the well!

Too many people are absent from the well. Because the woman came, she received a blessing. Simply because she came she received a blessing. So many stay away and/or do not avail themselves of the blessings that can be theirs.

People stay away for various reasons. Some feel like the Samaritan woman—scorned and derided because they lead different kinds of lives. Others feel rejected because of who and what they are. Some stay away because they don't want to rub shoulders with those they consider undesirable, those who don't fit in for one reason or another, those who are poor or shabby.

Some get so locked up in their own troubles, their own trials and tribulations, so trapped in that small box of self-pity, they are absent from the well. Some are so caught up in the pastimes and pleasures of this world, they absent themselves from the well. Singing as we hear in that hymn "Almost persuaded": "Go Spirit, go Thy way, some more convenient day, on Thee I'll call." Some are so puffed up with self-righteousness, they don't even think they need a drink.

People are absent from the well not realizing Jesus can give them a new heart, a new mind, a new song to sing, a new way of looking at life, a new way of loving other people—even the unlovable—if they have a thirst for the kingdom.

Another fact to remember is that the Samaritan woman brought a vessel. If you are young or never lived in the country or visited a rural area or foreign nation where folks rely on wells, you may not know about drawing water. Getting water from a well is not like cupping your hands or holding a glass under a faucet or pressing a button on a water fountain. If you are going to make use of a well, you must bring something with which to draw water. The woman told Jesus, "Sir you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep."

That is true of God's grace. Too many of us come to the well empty-handed. We bring no vessel in which to draw up the living water.

People say, “I come to church, but I don’t get anything out of it.” If you don’t bring anything in which or with which to get something, then you won’t get anything. We bring to the throne of grace the thin shells of ourselves instead of open, trusting hearts and souls, vessels in which to draw up the living water. If you don’t believe God can do something for you, you’ll never know when or what God does.

Lastly, the Samaritan woman not only received a blessing, she went and told others. “Come see a man who told me all that I ever did.” Come see for yourself. The woman at the well became a well woman and shared her wholeness with others.

Too many of us do not share what has been given to us. If we would witness to what we have received, others might be moved to come and receive also. When is the last time you told somebody what the Lord has done for you? When is the last time you shared with someone that he’s brought you “a mighty long way?”

My friends, we thirst after many things in this world. We thirst after money, power, prestige, position. We put our trust in them, we even pray about them. But like our Lord we too are at a crossroads, in the church and in society. We still have a choice and the question our Lord is asking us is do we have a thirst for the kingdom?

Jesus is asking us: Are you content to settle for the temporary thirst quenchers of life: the material values of this world, the right connections, the proper credentials, the things on which this society places so much value, things that will never slake the thirst of our parched dry souls? Or do you thirst after righteousness, thirst after peace, thirst after justice, thirst after the liberation of all of God’s people?

Do we thirst after those things that make for a just society as Jesus proclaimed the kingdom to be? If we gave our testimony this morning would we sing with the Psalmist, “Like the hart desireth the water brooks, so longeth my soul after thee, O Lord,” or sing with the elders, “I heard the voice of Jesus say, ‘Behold I freely give. The living waters, thirsty one, stoop down and drink and live.’ I came to Jesus and I drank of that life-giving stream. My thirst was quenched, my soul revived and now I live in him.” Do we have a thirst for the living water with which God truly enriches our lives? Do we have a thirst to emerge as faithful Christians to be more than we are? Do we have a thirst for the kingdom? Each of us must respond for herself or himself. Jesus is patiently waiting for our answer. Amen.