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Church of St. Benedict
Third Sunday of Lent, February 24, 2008
John 4:5-42

We've spent three Sundays of February
listening to the words and dreams of Black Americans.
And I hope it has felt as much about ALL of us as Americans and as Christians
as it has about the special history and experience of Black people in America.

Our church is very lucky, because we can look around,
and experience the diversity of our country right here.

We are a community of Black Americans, White Americans,
Filipino Americans,
of immigrants from the Caribbean, from South Africa,
from England, from the Ukraine.
God gives us a blessing, here.
A blessing of sharing our search for God,
sharing worship together, and sharing a building and a community,
with people who are different from us.
This is a sign of the kingdom of God among us.

Jesus also lived in a diverse world.
He was a Jew, living alongside Romans, Greeks, and Samaritans.
He talked to all of them.

Jesus came to the woman at the well, treating her as a sister.
She was a different race than he was -- a Samaritan.
Samaritans were greatly disliked by Jews, they were avoided, they could only
use certain roads, and Jews believed their religion was a sham, even though it
was so close to Judaism.
Jesus was a persecuted minority, as a Jew in a Roman territory, himself,
but the Samaritans were an even more oppressed minority.

The disciples are surprised to see Jesus talking to this Samaritan woman.
He is as comfortable talking to her as he was to any of his disciples.
He calls her out for all her failed marriages, which is sort of uncomfortable!
He tells her about a thing he calls living water.
A water that can become a spring, gushing up within each one of us,
and offering new life to us and to other people.
And she, the outsider, really gets it.

The disciples, on the other hand, can't stop thinking about food.
They can't stop worrying about what Jesus is going to eat.

They are worrying about whether Jesus has eaten lunch,
and Jesus has JUST been talking about *living water*.

Everyone who drinks of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty again.

And the disciples miss it,
but the woman at the well – who has not got much else in her life together,
she gets it!

She leaves her water jar – a metaphor of leaving the water of that well behind for
this living water --
and goes back to the city to tell people about this man she has met.

We are so lucky – we have so much,
and yet there are still places in our lives where we are thirsty
there are still places where we see others who are thirsty,
Some of you have been using the Lenten devotional from Episcopal Relief and
Development on the Millennium Development goals.

If we look around the world, we can see people who are thirsty
for truly clean water to drink,
thirsty for support because their parents have died of AIDS,
for even a primary-level education,
for a mosquito net to protect them from malaria,
just simple things, simple ways to stay alive.

We have been praying for Esther Simonson, one of our members who has gone
to Uganda to work with widows and orphans there for a couple weeks.

But there are also those close by, in our daily lives right here,
who are thirsty
for compassion and understanding
for support, to get themselves back on their feet,
thirsty because they have a family member with an illness or difficult situation,
thirsty because they are struggling with a difficult situation at work,
thirsty because they suffer from depression or mental illness,
thirsty because they are struggling to find themselves.

Sometimes, those people are us, ourselves.
We are hungry and thirsty for more than lunch, for more than water.
Although sometimes it's easy to mistake food and drink for the real things that
sustain us – we can fall into an addiction, overeating, or not eating enough,
when it is not food and water that can truly sustain us, in the end.
This is part of what Lent tries to teach us.

Jesus says that living water will bring us eternal life.
And I'm not sure he means that we will live forever
or that we will go to heaven, exactly.
What's he talking about?
After communion today, we will sing an old slave spiritual,

“Steal Away,” and I encourage you to listen to it,
because it sounds like it’s about escaping to heaven,
when really it was a song slaves would sing to signal that there were members of
the Underground Railroad in the woods,
and that it was safe to sneak away, to steal away,
and try to get to freedom.

And when Jesus talks about eternal life, too,
he doesn’t mean heaven so much as he means that
if only we drink this water, life will spring out of us,
a life that can’t be extinguished,
a life that we can pass on to other people, even beyond our death.
It’s a kind of freedom. A way of living new life.

What if life can spring out from us
even from the ways we are broken people,
even from the ways we doubt,
even from the ways we struggle.
Life can spring out of us.

The thing about water, is that it has to flow to stay fresh.
If you dam a body of water,
it gets stagnant and fills up with silt.
Water that flows through something, washes it out.
If this living water flows through us,
not only will it flow out to others,
it will wash us, it will flow through us and help us heal, too.

This living water was what Martin Luther King saw,
what he dreamed would flow over us, as a whole nation.
A water that would flow between us, one to another,
regardless of race.
We should care about each other,
we belong to each other,
we are responsible for each other.

And now I challenge us also, to look beyond race.
Who is the Other now?
Where should we direct this water that Jesus gives us?
Who will show us, the way the Samaritan woman showed the disciples,
who Jesus is and what this living water is, that he offers to us?

Amen.