

<i>SERMON AT</i>	<i>St. Andrew's, Greensboro</i>
<i>Offered by:</i>	<i>Leon Spencer</i>
<i>Church season:</i>	<i>Lent 3rd A</i>
<i>Date:</i>	<i>March 12, 2017</i>
<i>OT:</i>	<i>Exodus 17:1-7</i>
<i>Psalms:</i>	<i>95</i>
<i>Epistle:</i>	<i>Romans 5:1-11</i>
<i>Gospel:</i>	<i>John 4:5-42</i>
<i>Key scripture:</i>	<i>Samaritan woman</i>

On TV Thursday night I watched someone try to give a small emaciated baby in South Sudan some water. The baby wasn't so sure until he got a taste, then he wanted more. Literally living water. I wonder if he is alive today.

Water is a marvelous image. "*The water that I will give,*" Jesus says in today's passage from the Gospel of John, becomes "*a spring of water, gushing....,*" flowing with that which sustains life, and points to eternal life. Jesus goes on to suggest that the water of which he speaks is available to everyone – no doubt an appealing thought to the child in the Sudan, who like the Samaritan woman was confused as to what he meant. But what's interesting to me here is not so much that Jesus is offering what he calls *living water*, but that he is offering it to someone beyond his community – a Samaritan, and a woman. That's what I want to talk about this morning.

"*How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?*" she asks. Jesus doesn't, you'll notice, even deal with the question. Onward he goes into a discourse about living water. But however he responds, Jesus *engages* her, *talks* to her, *listens* to her. And what he is doing is fundamentally connected to the issue of community... or, perhaps, to the barriers that human beings erect to prevent true community. Nevermind the details of the Samaritan woman's life. Nevermind that Jews do not talk to Samaritans. Jesus is testifying to human community. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus takes it as a given that they are related, and if that is so, he has words for her and ears for her. A divine message.

Our African brothers and sisters got it right. Some years ago John Mbiti, the African philosopher, referred to what many of us were taught in school: The Cartesian maxim, "I think, therefore I am." Prof. Mbiti said that an African would never say that. Instead, an African would say, "I am related, therefore I am." (If, by the way, this sounds familiar, Bishop Desmond Tutu helped to make this vision of human relationship famous some years later, calling it by the Zulu word *ubuntu*; many of our churches, and our youth, have now studied *ubuntu*.) But there it is: "I am related, therefore I am." When Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman about living water he was embracing their being related, their sharing in community; when Jesus then *invited* the Samaritan woman, and her village, to *share* in the living water, he was pointing to the fact that living in community carried with it obligations to one another. Yes, there could be a different sermon here, about the offer of living water and the promise of eternal life, but *make no mistake*, Jesus is also testifying here to the fact that we are related, whether Jew or Samaritan or whatever we may be, and we take on responsibilities to the community. This theme, which crops up again and again in the Bible, is one we *must not* neglect.

Across communities and nations and across generations and centuries and millennia, societies and faith communities have struggled with the questions that the Bible had already

answered, and answered particularly in Jesus's conversation with the Samaritan: How are we related? How do we live as a community? How do we embrace the human family far beyond our nation and our particular faith tradition? Jesus taught us that we neither live out our lives nor live out our faith as individuals. We do it as community. That which obstructs relationship Jesus challenges us to break down.

The trouble is, we humans haven't been very good about being community, and that's true today for us as Americans. We're not the first society and nation to struggle with community, but that's not a good excuse. Here in the United States this theme has fallen on bad times, and that's in part because of something we're proud of: American individualism, wrapped up in the power of the phrase, *personal liberty*. Of course there is something positive to say about personal liberty, and the freedom we have to pursue our individual dreams and use our individual gifts is something to value. I know that. I accept that. But... we celebrate ourselves as a nation by seeing our nation at its best when it restricts us, as a community, the least. We become a country that speaks of community to the extent that the community – serving the *common good* – does not interfere with our individual choices. Paradoxically, we also speak of community in a restrictive sense, one that limits independent thinking, especially in time of crisis. We thus become a country where our relatedness leaves us free to be separate from one another and, simultaneously, a country where our sense of community frees us to repudiate our relations with those with whom we disagree.

From the 19th century onward the American church has faced a similar dilemma. One important, often dominant, strain of American Christianity has emphasized human sinfulness and the need for a personal God, a personal faith; and those Christian brothers and sisters who place this view front and center (we all do to some extent) ... have created a litany of personal behavioral mandates to enforce their beliefs – quite a departure from Jesus' dignified treatment of the Samaritan woman. In the process they define who is in and who is out of community. The more liberal Christian theologies have taken a different road. These sisters and brothers in Christ have identified with the marginalized in our society, and those who are not in solidarity with such groups, who see the world and the faith differently from our dominant theologies, are left wondering whether they can still call their faith community home. Whoever *we* are, in whatever "camp," our sense of being, truly, a *community of faith*, has been undermined.

The image of the Sudanese infant being given water still haunts me. So too does another "current event" of the last couple of days. Yesterday in the paper I read of the draconian cuts in funding for food programs for both poor elderly and poor children in the proposed federal budget, along with cuts in efforts to protect God's creation and cuts to international programs that mitigate humanitarian crises around the world – such as the Sudan, Somalia, Syria. With these images in mind, I want to narrow this complex theme of community into what I suggest is the most critical aspect of our struggle to be faithful, that of seeking the common good in a manner that places the values of a rampant individualism as secondary to a interdependent community. "Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you; or thirsty, and give you a drink?" When we say, as a columnist in the *News & Record* did this past week, that Medicaid, Medicare, and food and unemployment assistance undermine personal liberty by "taking from some and giving to others... to whom it does not belong," we have lost sight of the common good, we have lost sight of the vision of relatedness that Jesus embraced when he offered the Samaritan woman living water.

It is not for me to say how these stunning needs in our community, nation and world are to be addressed, or what the agenda should be. There are many ways of looking at government budgets, for example, and reasonable people may disagree. And of course there is something healthy about empowering the *individual* human spirit. But, the moment individual freedom becomes the god to be celebrated both in faith and in public life, then we cease to honor the truth to be found in Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well. That truth is that we are in community together, and when we cease to honor the concept with all the depth that word implies, we become increasingly insensitive to the world beyond our own immediate needs and wants and hopes... for the world beyond is simply no longer relevant to discourse.

My point is simply this: God calls us into community, not only within our community of faith, but also as part of an entire world of people all created in God's image. We need to recapture and rediscover community, to faithfully discern our common calling as people of God, and I believe Jesus was trying to tell us that. Every time we come together to contribute to the common life we reveal God at work in our lives. It matters that we belong to this nation, this society, this community, this congregation here assembled – and it is our calling to work at being community, in all of these permutations. There is great diversity within any of these defined communities, and we find all sorts of incompatibilities within them. But, you see... that's where Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well come in, for through it we see Jesus putting no limits on the definition of neighbor – he did the same thing in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. And when he took *that* defining step of making neighbors *universal*, he put no limits upon the call to community. This encompassed the Samaritan woman's village and their faith, despite her rather disreputable history; this encompassed the reality of Samaritans in relation to Jews. Jesus removed the option of reducing people to *them* and *us*.

I am increasingly convinced that our faith compels us to confront the dominant societal view about the glories of individualism, prevents us from retreating into our individual cocoons by saying that the world doesn't work the way we wish, compels us instead to hear one another in all of our richness, and presses us to march forward into the challenging realities of seeking a life together in spite of our different understandings and priorities. That's a message for daily life, I think, and a message for the universal faithful.

Many of you will be acquainted with the concept represented by the word *kairos*. *Kairos* is a Greek word having to do with time, but not just *time*, rather the idea of a special moment of time. It was used biblically (Luke does it) to speak of a time of testing or a time of special importance. In the past century people in struggles for justice and liberation have used the term as *a moment of truth*. The famous *Kairos Document* in South Africa in 1985, with its challenge to apartheid, and the *Kairos Palestine* document in 2009, called upon a vision of *kairos* as “a divine visitation which brings us face to face with God and the demands of faith.”

Perhaps we people of faith are always facing a *kairos* moment; we just don't bother to recognize it. ... Perhaps *now* is a *kairos* time, calling our country to aspire to be community together. *Kairos* is an opportunity that comes when we speak to someone, enough to startle them into saying what the Samaritan woman said, “How is it that you are speaking with me?” That's when we find ourselves breaking down barriers as Jesus did at the well. That's when we offer living water to another because of the faith that is within us. That's when we can say that we have responsibilities for those among us who are in need. And make no mistake about it: That's when the power of God is discovered... by us, and by our community. Amen.