

SERMON TITLE: "Varieties of Religious Experience: Quenched by Living Water"
SERMON TEXT: John 4:7-15, 39-42
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 7, 2016, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

While I was in college, earning my bachelor's degree in Philosophy and Religion, I learned of a book by William James called *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. William James published that book in 1902, while he was a professor at Harvard. I never actually read the book, but the title and idea fascinated me—the idea that there are a lot of different ways that people experience God in their lives.

For these first few weeks of August, I'm going to use William James' book title for a sermon series in which we'll look at three different biblical characters and see what kind of religious experience they had. Maybe their variety of religious experience will confirm an experience we've had, or maybe it will open up a new way for us to connect with God. Today, we start with John chapter four and the woman at the well. Let's learn from her religious experience of being quenched by living water.

1—SHE WAS THIRSTY

We begin with the woman's life before she met Jesus. This story assumes that the woman who came to the well was thirsty. With water jar in hand, she was there to meet her most basic need for drinking, cooking, and cleaning. Life wasn't easy 2000 years ago. You couldn't just turn on the faucet or twist the top off a disposable bottle. You had to walk long distances and carry heavy weights, and that was considered women's work. If she wasn't thirsty before she set out to the well, I'm sure she was thirsty by the time she got back home. And then, of course, she had to do it all over again the next day, when the water jar was empty, and her household returned to its never-ending dry condition.

Of course, the point of this story isn't just about physical thirst. As essential as water is, the woman's dryness wouldn't and couldn't be satisfied with mere H₂O. She had longings and needs that

were spiritual, as well. The conversation she had with Jesus indicates that her soul was dry for several reasons.

First of all, she was living in a spiritual drought caused by conflict, division, and disrespect between Jews and Samaritans. Without going into all the historical details about why those neighboring peoples were at odds with each other, suffice it to say that the Jews thought Samaritans were substandard in their history, ancestry, culture, and religion. Because Jews considered Samaritans spiritually unclean, the Jews tried to avoid dealing with them as much as possible. Of course, total avoidance wasn't always practical. For example, Jesus and his disciples made frequent trips between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. Samaria was in between. Unless the Galileans wanted to walk many extra miles on their way to and from the temple in Jerusalem, they had to subject themselves to the contamination of Samaria, and the Samaritans had to put up with those snobby Jews traipsing through their land and past their holy site at Mt. Gerizim.

When people live with that kind of disrespect and tension on a regular basis, life becomes stressful and anxious. When we're suspicious of each other, and on edge, our spirits suffer. We become less kind and less loving. When we're afraid someone might hurt our bodies or our self-esteem, we become defensive and rude. We close our hearts and are less able to sense God's strong and caring presence. We become less flexible and more fragile. So it makes sense that the woman at the well was spiritually thirsty. It's not easy to live in a time of ethnic conflict and division, especially if your group is the one constantly reminded of your inferior status.

Of course, the woman at the well also experienced the spiritual drought of gender discrimination. Not only was she put down for being a Samaritan, but she had the added burden of being a woman in a man's world. Since the day she was born, she was considered less than her brothers and male peers. Her value was less, her knowledge was less, her opinions were less, her worth was less. Those cultural and religious rules and realities of her society left her spiritually thirsty.

And then there was the issue of her marital status. In verse 16, Jesus told the woman to go and get her husband. She answered that she had no husband. Jesus, who seemed to know all this already, replied then that she had had five husbands and that the man currently in her life was not her husband. Based on this dialog, Bible interpreters have often assumed that the woman at the well was promiscuous and adulterous, or at the very least, an unpleasant and difficult woman, impossible for a man to stay married to. But the commentary I read this week had a different idea. It suggested that her many marriages might have been the result of an unfortunate amount of death and grief. In a society that had no Social Security or life insurance policies, the only way a widow could survive would be to marry again, as quickly as possible. Whatever the reason for her marital turnover, such frequent disruption of intimate relationships would have left the woman drained dry emotionally. No doubt, she would have been spiritually thirsty.

2—QUENCHED BY LIVING WATER

As the woman carried her empty clay jar to Jacob's well that day, little did she know what kind of religious experience she was going to have. Little did she realize that she would leave the well quenched by living water.

Jesus had arrived at the well first. Verse six indicates that Jesus was tired out by his journey and sat by the well to rest. It was about noon, so he might have been hot. No wonder he wanted the refreshment of a drink. But Jesus had no bucket to draw the water, so he had to wait for someone else to help him. When the woman arrived, Jesus—a Jewish man—broke spiritual and cultural protocols to speak with her, a Samaritan woman. Driven by his own physical need for water, Jesus put aside any concerns about being contaminated by her impurities and apparently drank from her Samaritan bucket.

Jesus' willingness to overlook social mores and religious boundaries was not lost on the Samaritan woman. His boldness empowered her to risk a question to him in return. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" was loaded with possibilities for discussion. Jesus took

the bait, engaging her in a conversation that treated her with respect sufficient to draw her forward into new religious understandings. In John 4:21, Jesus acknowledged that neither the Samaritans nor the Jews had the lock on God. Since God is spirit, God wants to be worshiped in spirit and truth, and is not bound to the particularities of a temple on Mt. Gerizim or Jerusalem, said Jesus. Jesus' willingness to put down his Jewish guard and to rise above some long-established religious fault lines gave the woman an opportunity to experience spiritual growth. As they talked on and on, the woman soaked up the living water that Jesus offered her. Her parched soul was moisturized and hydrated. Her thirsty spirit drank deeply of the gushing spring of eternal life.

John 4:27 tells us that, when Jesus' disciples caught up with him at the well, "they were astonished that he was speaking with a woman." Their teacher, their spiritual leader, was breaking the accepted rules of conduct between men and women. But that very willingness on Jesus' part was what made it possible for the woman at the well to discover that Jesus might be the Messiah she and her Samaritan people had been hoping for. Verse 28 tells us that the woman was so excited by that possibility that she left her water jar by the well and hurried back to the city. As she told the people about Jesus, she was transformed from a troubled Samaritan woman-who'd-had-five-husbands into a capable spiritual leader of her people. Because of her testimony and powerful influence, many Samaritans went to see Jesus for themselves and came to believe that Jesus was the savior of the world.

We can assume that the Samaritan woman eventually went back to the well to fill up her water jar and carry it home. That routine of daily life would have to continue. But the good news of this story is that the woman's life would never be the same again. Through her encounter with Jesus at the well, her spiritual thirst was quenched by living water.

CONCLUSION

Today, we might be like the Samaritan woman. We may not have to carry a heavy water jar, but we have burdens, nevertheless. We are dried out from crying over our problems. Ethnic, cultural, and

religious conflicts in the world and our own country cause the leaves of peace to wither on the vine. Violence, disrespect, disparity, and suspicion create a desert that is hostile to life. Even in our personal lives, there are struggles with relationships and grief-upon-grief that have put us on edge. We feel undervalued. We have low self-worth. We feel like our joy, our hope, our life, and our spirits are being drained dry.

But the good news of this story is that we don't have to remain in that desolate, parched place. Jesus is willing to break down the barriers that hold us there. No matter who we are, Jesus is willing to reach across and engage with us. We can ask him questions, and we can listen to his responses. We can be led by Christ into a higher understanding of God's spirit and truth that will value, nurture, and quench our thirsty spirits, so that we can become empowered to lead others to the living water of Christ.

We human beings come in all shapes and sizes, colors and characters, genders and generations. So, it makes sense that we'd have a variety of religious needs and experiences. Maybe you can't relate much to the woman at the well. That's OK. Maybe you'll connect more with one of the stories coming up in the next couple weeks. But, if your spirit is feeling dry today, I invite you to drink deeply from the springs of living water gushing up to eternal life. Allow Jesus to hydrate and refresh your shriveled spirit. Like the woman at the well, be quenched with living water.