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Third Sunday of Lent**

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Life-giving Water

Water is precious. Water is life-giving. It slakes our thirst. It cleanses our bodies. It refreshes our spirits. It creates bonds among us as we sip tea together. Water is deadly. An angry ocean will dash our bodies against the rocks. It will drown us. Water will alienate us one from another as we fight over who has a right to the precious water. Water is a symbol that holds all of these possibilities together. In most every religion, water is sacred, sacred because of the very qualities we have just listed. An example is Christian Baptism. Entering into the Baptismal water, a person dies to sin, and rises out of the water a new creation. Water transitions us through death into new life.

When the Semitic tribes who wandered in the desert felt threatened by the lack of water, they murmured against Moses who had freed them from Egyptian servitude and was leading them to the Promised Land. They regretted leaving Egypt and questioned, after all that God had done to free them, if God were really present among them. Moses was at his wit's end, and asked God what he must do. We know that God sent water from the stone that Moses struck. The people drank; they lived and were refreshed by the water from that rock. God is named the Rock of our salvation, the Rock through whose waters we live and are refreshed.

Because water is so precious, wells from which water is drawn were central to life in ancient Palestine. The wells were very deep because the water bubbling at a great depth would not be subject to the times without rains and would not dry up. Young women often went to the village well together. Wells were the site of social gatherings, a place where commerce was carried on, and a place where the young met and fell in love. Jacob met Rachel at a well. Moses met his wife

at a well. Even today, we talk about gathering at the local watering hole. We exchange stories around the office water fountain. Many confessions have been made to a friend around the kitchen table while drinking tea or coffee.

In the Gospel we just read, the Samaritan woman who went to the well was not young; she was old enough to have had five husbands. She was not in the company of other women, swapping stories. Probably women did not associate with her. She was alone, but she needed water, and so she came to the well. Here, she met another thirsty person, Jesus. Certainly, Jesus was thirsty; he had been traveling under the noonday sun. His thirst was more than physical, however. He had an unquenchable thirst to spread the message of the Kingdom, the message of peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, justice. It is well to remember that Christ thirsts for us just as we thirst for him.

The apostles who had been on an errand saw Jesus speaking to the Samaritan women. They were not so much surprised that he was talking to a woman as that he was talking to a Samaritan woman. Samaritans and Jews did not speak. But Jesus' thirst to include her in the message of salvation dissolved that division. In the kingdom, there are no insiders nor outsiders, no we and them.

As this story unfolds, I think, we have a profound model of prayer. We know the story well. Jesus told the woman that if she asked, he would give her Living Water, the water that streamed from the Rock of Salvation found in the desert. It was very important that the woman express her need for this Water, that she ask for it. Jesus influences us with the pressure of his love, but he does not deny us our free will. It is important in prayer that we express to Jesus exactly what is on our minds, exactly what we desire – whether we are proud of it or not. And it is also important that prayer is a real dialogue, like the interaction between Jesus and the woman. Jesus

spoke and the woman listened. The woman spoke and Jesus listened. Trust grew, the woman overcame any guilt or shame she may have had in her effort to speak honestly to Jesus and in that interaction, she began to see more clearly and recognize Jesus as the prophet who he was, as the Living Water from which she was drinking, the water in she died to sin and rose to Christ.

Unburdened by her past, the woman ran to her village to tell everyone of the prophet whose knowledge of her had healed her, washed her very being with Living Water. Then, the villagers came to see for themselves. It is so important that we experience Christ for ourselves and not rely totally on the experiences of others. That is what adult Christianity is about, encountering the Living God, the Living Water wherever we are in our lives. The encounter is the essence of relationship, the essence of prayer.

As we continue our Lenten journey, let us gather at the well with one another; let us encourage one another to enter into honest dialog with Jesus. In that encounter, we will be flooded with the Living Waters of Salvation. May we never take water for granted and may we never look at water as anything less than sacred.

Nancy C. Ring