

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, February 24, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

“THE WELL IS DEEP”

John 4:4-42; sermon text verse 11

Last week we read of Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus that took place as cool evening breezes rustled the leaves and refreshed people sitting on their roof-tops. Today we read of the encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman which took place at noon, when the hot sun drove people inside their homes to find shelter.

Now at the time Israel comprised Galilee to the north; Judah, including Jerusalem, to the south; and Samaria in the middle. When Jews wanted to travel from Judah to Galilee, they first went east, then north, then back west into Galilee, avoiding Samaria altogether. Samaritans were descendants of Jewish people who centuries before had intermarried with foreigners. The Samaritans kept the Jewish faith in part, though they had also been influenced by foreign gods. Their centre of worship was not in Jerusalem, but on Mt. Gerazim where Alexander the Great had built them a temple. There had been clashes between Jews and Samaritans over the years, so the Jewish people took the long way around Samaria. But not Jesus. Travelling from Jerusalem to Galilee, he went straight north, right through Samaritan territory. Jesus was and is the man for all times and places and people. So Jesus came to Sychar at noon. Weary from the journey he sat by Jacob’s well and asked a surprised Samaritan woman for a drink. Jesus said to her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is speaking to you, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” Of course, he was talking about the living water of God’s Spirit, but she thought he was talking about physical water. “Sir, you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep, where do you get that living water?” (V. 11)

Now literally speaking she was right. Jacob’s well was a hundred feet deep. Most people let their bucket down and drew water from the surface. But if you wanted the freshest water, you would let your bucket down to the bottom where water percolated into the well. Of course, you would need a heavy bucket with a long rope in order to hit the depths. So how could Jesus get that living water, for as she said to him. “You have nothing to draw from and the well is deep.”

Unwittingly the woman pointed to a dilemma we face in life, especially in today’s culture. There are deep wells, but we rarely explore their depths. And in a world that desires quantity rather than quality, perhaps we are not really equipped to do so.

The curator of an art gallery visited Amsterdam to see Rembrandt's Night Watch. He knew the painting from reproductions, but wanted to see the original. He sat before it at length, but then a tourist, guide book in hand, pushed in front of him, "Is this Rembrandt's Night Watch?" he demanded. "Good! That makes sixty-six of the hundred greatest masterpieces I've seen." And he left with barely a glance! That's the problem with today's culture. We run from place to place, from thing to thing, without really exploring the depths. We think we can get it all in one listen or one look. As our result we live superficially. We know a little about a lot of things. "The well is deep and you have nothing to draw with." Now we can't be experts on everything, but life is much more satisfying when we can deeply explore some area of interest.

Today I want us to think about some of life's deep wells, wells from which we can all draw deeply. And as we think about these wells, I hope God will better equip us to draw deeply from them. I trust God will give us the bucket we need to explore the depths.

First, there is the deep well of human experience.

In our youth oriented culture, we marvel at youth and their abilities. That's great but there is a depth of wisdom and insight that comes with age, lessons you only learn from life experience. A young man graduated from university and ran from his graduation ceremony shouting, "Here I come world, I have my B. A." And the world shouted back, "Stick around son, and let the world teach you the rest of the alphabet."

Three weeks ago I spoke of the Mississauga resident Oscar Peterson who died recently. Over the years I have collected a number of Peterson recordings, enough to get a wide perspective on his career. When you hear his recordings made in the 1940's when he was 20-something you hear a young jazz pianist with a dazzling technique. But to a large degree it was on the surface. But decade by decade you hear an increasing depth of expression and emotion in Oscar's music which reflected his deepening life experience. And after a serious stroke in 1993 took away the playing ability of his left hand, his music took on even more depth and reflected his courage to persevere and emerge victoriously in spite of limitations.

As we get older we develop a deep well of experience to draw from. This is especially true when it comes to suffering. Take this woman at the well. She had five husbands and was now living with a man who wasn't her husband. But I don't think we should judge her too harshly. Who knows the full story? One thing for sure is that she must have suffered a great deal. The joy of new love always giving way to sadness and the feeling of insecurity and inferiority as the relationships came to an end. And the fact that she came alone to the well at noon may indicate that she was being shunned and excluded by other women who

normally came early in the morning. Perhaps it took someone with her depth of life experience to recognize the true love and acceptance which reached out to her in Jesus, not the kind of love other men had for her, but the true love which comes from God through his Son. Maybe that's why she became such an effective an evangelist for Jesus, going back to the town and telling people all about him. And it's like that for all of us. It's our growing life experience and self-understanding which makes us aware of our need for Christ and his grace.

Jesus began his public ministry when he was thirty years old. Clearly God wanted Jesus to have a deep well of life experience to draw from before sending him forth on his saving mission. The Bible tells us that Jesus learned obedience through the things he suffered. And Jesus explored the depths of human suffering, especially on the Cross when he cried out ,”My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

I know that I am a better pastor now than when I started because twenty-one years of ministry and just plain living have given me a deeper well of understanding to draw on. The deep well of experience, especially the well of suffering can make any of us very useful in serving God and helping others who suffer. The playwright Thornton Wilder said, “Only you who are wounded, can heal.” It was profoundly true for Jesus and it is true for us, too.

Secondly, there is the deep well of faith.

So many Christians, even as adults, never grow beyond a Sunday School faith. Now our faith is so simple that a child can grasp it. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” But that verse is very deep, having given rise to thousands upon thousands of sermons and books. One does not become an instant expert in the Christian faith! There are great depths we can draw from for the strengthening of our faith and our growth as obedient disciples. We can draw on the depths of Scripture as well as the testimony and teaching of scholars and saints and martyrs. For there is nothing we go through that they haven't also gone through at a much deeper level. And they witness to the fact that God's promises hold fast! What is so frustrating about the arguments of the sceptics and atheists is that they usually present a shallow stereotype of the Christian faith. They set up and attack a straw man, rather than real Christianity. And you want to say to them, “You haven't gone deep enough.” Let's not make the same mistake.

Or take worship itself. The woman asked Jesus where people ought to worship - on Mt. Gerazim or in Jerusalem. He told her “The hour is coming and now is when people will worship God neither on this mountain or in Jerusalem. They will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.” Many people think the purpose of worship is to come for a bit of an spiritual uplift, even some Sunday morning entertainment. But worshipping God is deep, deep indeed.

Something profound and mysterious happens when we step into God's house. This is holy ground. Here we commune spirit to spirit with Almighty God, the Father, revealed in Jesus Christ, and present to us by the Holy Spirit. Here we are cleansed and challenged and comforted by God and his word. Here we cry out to God from the depths of our being. Here we offer ourselves and our resources to God in reverence and thanksgiving. Here we are surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. Now we don't want our worship to be stuffy, but neither do we want to be so casual about it that we miss its depth. If we come to worship seeking a surface experience, that's what we will draw from it. But if we come to worship God in spirit and in truth, if we come seeking to know God and do his will, then we will draw deeply from the well of faith and worship. We will take from it what we bring to it.

Finally, there is the deep well of Christ himself.

Jesus said to the woman, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is speaking to you, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." Christ is the gift of God, the one whom God sent to quench our spiritual thirst and satisfy our spiritual hunger. He is the source of living water which quenches our thirst for mercy and forgiveness and purpose. He is the source of hope, of strength, of love, of eternity. He tells us that the living water he gives will become in us a spring welling up to eternal life. Christ is a deep well, a bottomless well.

How do you draw living water from Christ? By repentance, by faith, by worship, by eating and drinking at the table of the Lord, by attending to God's word. Most of all, by entering into a personal relationship with Christ, calling upon his Name and inviting His living presence to dwell within you. In John chapter 6 Jesus makes this promise, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will not hunger; and whoever believes in me will never thirst."

So many people have found it to be so. Malcolm Muggeridge, the English writer and convert to Christianity reflected on all his life's successes and concluded, "All these things are nothing measured against one draught of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty, irrespective of who or what they are. What, I ask myself, does life hold which could possibly put in the balance against the refreshment of drinking that water?"

