

## “Jesus the Thirst-Quencher”

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Based upon Jeremiah 1:4-8; John 4:5-30

There’s a story told about a shipwreck that took place in the Atlantic Ocean near the Equator. A bunch of men were able to survive by getting into a lifeboat, but after many days they were so thirsty that they felt sure they would still die before being rescued. The only water they had was what they could squeeze from the pieces of canvas on their lifeboat. Finally, some rescuers arrived in the nick of time, and found the men prostrate from dehydration. Medics quickly got to work to revive them. It was only when they were well again that the rescuers told them the heartbreaking news. All the while that the men were fighting to stay alive on a few drops of moisture a day, they had actually been floating on potable water because they were floating near where the Amazon River met the ocean. The Amazon is such a large river that it pushes fresh water out into the ocean for dozens of miles. So, they could have dipped a bucket off the side of their boat and drawn out as much water as they needed.<sup>1</sup>

I must confess that I had to research this little story before deciding to share it. It seemed incredible to me there could be drinkable water in the ocean. But it’s true. Scientists can’t say exactly where the Amazon stops and the ocean begins. All they know is that fresh, life-giving water exists even in places where you would not think you could find it. Keep that in mind as we consider today’s Scripture lesson from the *Gospel of John*. The two main characters in the story, Jesus and an unnamed Samaritan woman, were both thirsty; Jesus for regular drinkable water after his long walk through Samaria, and the woman for something else, although she didn’t realize it at first. But after she found the living water her soul truly sought, in the last place she would have thought to look—the words of a Jewish stranger—she was transformed, and became the rescuer for her village by telling them about the living water hidden in their midst.

As is the case with all of John’s stories, there is a lot in the story of the woman at the well, who for simplicity sake I am going to call Photini from now on. That is the name the Eastern Orthodox church has given her, Photini or Photina, which means “enlightened one.” In their tradition, Photini is a great apostle and martyr. Legend has it that Photini was baptized on Pentecost, along with her five sisters. She became a great preacher in Africa with many followers. Jesus visited her in a dream and sent her to Rome, where Emperor Nero was persecuting Christians. There Photini and her followers converted many, including Nero’s daughter, before being arrested and beaten and abused in horrific ways. According to the story, Photini and her followers were forced to drink poison, and were thrown in fire, but survived. She was finally martyred many days after all of her siblings and followers had been killed. In light of her great faith and witness, she is celebrated as a saint and commemorated on February 26<sup>th</sup> on the Orthodox calendar.

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<sup>1</sup> Bloom, Phil (Fr.), Sermon: *Come to the Water*, St. Mary of the Valley Parish, retrieved March 17, 2020 from <http://stmaryvalleybloom.org/homilyfor18sunday-a.html>

You can make of these stories what you will, but John's story in the Bible takes place before all of this happened, when the woman was a legend in her own community for other reasons, none of them good. As her conversation with Jesus reveals, Photini had had five husbands, and was living with a sixth man who had not married her. She was at the well in the heat of the day, when no one would go out for water unless they had to, presumably to avoid having to encounter all the women who might have something to say about her life. These facts have led many throughout the ages to conclude that Photini must have been a wanton sinner, a promiscuous woman, who by the grace of God in Jesus Christ was saved by being converted by him and reconnected with her village.

Although that particular interpretation has been quite popular through the ages, it infuriates me because in addition to being sexist, it is no more grounded in the Biblical text or historical reality of the times than some of the fantastic legends about Photini's post-well life. Assuming John meant Jesus' reference to Photini's husbands be taken literally and not metaphorically, (which is another legitimate way to interpret this text I'll save for another time), Photini's multiple marriages are not proof that she was some kind of "black widow" man-killer, serial monogamist unable to make a commitment, or prostitute. They speak more to a tragic life than a sinful one.

In Samaria, as in Israel, women did not have a say in who they married. They were the property first of their fathers and then their husbands. According to the Law, if a woman's husband died, it was the obligation of the deceased's brother to marry his widow to keep his "property" in the family. This practice is called Levirate marriage. As some of you might remember from our Lenten Bible study, when this situation happened, the woman had to untie the shoe of her brother-in-law in public, as an act of submission to him as her new husband. If he refused to marry her, she then was allowed to untie his shoe, take it off, throw it on the ground, and spit in his face. But after that she didn't have many options for survival. Maybe this was how Photini ended up living with someone out of wedlock. She had gone through all her in-laws until no one would have her. There's another story in the Old Testament about this happening to a woman named Tamar. After her first husband died, his brother would not perform his responsibility, so according to the text God put him to death. Then rather than link Tamar to his third son, or marry her himself, Judah, Tamar's father-in-law, cast her out and sent her back to her father, on the excuse that his third son needed to grow up. Judah judged her, as centuries' worth of people have judged Photini, for being responsible for tragic events that were entirely out of her control.

Imagine what it would have been like for Photini to lose *five* husbands. To be treated like chattel that way would be hard enough. But if she actually grew to love them all, talk about a painful, loss-filled life! And if no one would have her because they thought she was a jinx, then she would have that horrible familial and communal rejection on top of her grief. I imagine people watching her walk by and whispering under their breath, "stay away from her if you want to live," or "there goes bad luck Betty," or whatever her given name really was. Those who didn't judge her probably still made her uncomfortable with their pity. She wasn't seen as a person with thoughts, feelings, and dreams, she was just what had happened to her, a tragedy. It was enough to make any person start to believe that she was cursed in one way or another.

So, Photini skulked out to Jacob's well to get water at a time when she wouldn't have to see the looks or hear the whispers, and ran into the last person she expected to see there, a Jewish man in the heart of Samaria. I talked a few weeks ago when we were considering the story of Nicodemus about the importance of remembering that Jesus was Jewish. For Nicodemus, that meant that Jesus was spiritual kin, a worshiper of the same God. But for Photini, Jesus' Jewishness meant he was a potential antagonist. Jews and Samaritans hadn't gotten along since the Assyrian conquest of Israel centuries before. The Samaritans were Jews who had stayed in the land and married the enemy. The Jews were those who had been taken into exile. Although they both worshiped Yahweh and kept the Mosaic covenant, each group felt the other was doing it wrong. Thus, Jesus' being at the well probably made Photini think, "*Oh great, even coming here at noon I can't catch a break.*" Then Jesus talked to her, which was socially unheard of, and confused her with his talk of living water. But when he said, "Go get your husband," she still probably thought: "*Well, so much for that offer. Here comes the judgment.*" "I have no husband."

But Jesus didn't judge her. He didn't say, "Wow! What a man-killer! *If you repent, I'll give you living water.*" He didn't pity her or fear her or behave as if her history was all that she was. Instead, after revealing that he knew her tragic story, he kept on talking to her, treating her like an intelligent person of faith, not an object. By the time he had proclaimed himself to be the Messiah, Photini was bubbling over with so much living water that she wanted to share it with the very people who had made her feel rejected, unloved, and cursed. That tells us just how much the encounter changed her right there. Notice what she told them: "Come meet the man who told me everything I'd ever done. He couldn't be the Messiah, could he?" What thrilled her most was that he saw her, knew her, and still wanted to bless her. That is truly what quenched her thirst. In the Church, we are used to thinking of the "living water" Jesus spoke of as a biblical image for salvation and eternal life, and it is that. But in the Prophets, it is also a symbol of the blessing-filled life we can have here and now when we live in faith with God. The living water is thirst-quenching because it is the sustaining and saving grace and love of God.

We need that living water as much as Photini did because human beings are thirsty creatures by nature. But that doesn't mean that we always recognize our real thirst. Often, we are too busy being thirsty for other things to notice. We are thirsty for adventure, for love, for knowledge and success. These days most of us are also desperately thirsty for a resumption of normal life, for restored community, for something that will make us feel safe in the pandemic. God will help us to satisfy some of these thirsts, I am sure. But today, in light of Photini's story, I want us to think about the deep thirsts Jesus quenched in her because we have those too whether we realize it or not: the thirst to be known and accepted as we really are, and the thirst for meaning. These are the thirsts which are best quenched with living water.

"Before you were born, I knew you," God told Jeremiah in today's other lesson. If only we felt that way! But so many of us go through life feeling like few people know the *real* us. We have people in our lives who are friends who know the aspect of our selves we reveal to them. If we are blessed, we have parents who know our journey and spouses who support us through it. If we are really blessed, we have love. All of these people may know us pretty well. But human

relationships usually come with external expectations that we feel we have to meet. That leaves some scrambling throughout their lives to meet those expectations, and others feeling defined by the fact that they will never be able to do so. It leaves a lot of people believing, “I am what happened to me,” or “I am what I have produced,” or “I am who I am related to, or what I look like.”<sup>2</sup> Those may or may not be bad things, but they aren’t who we really are inside. So, we are left thirsting consciously or unconsciously for someone or something else which will finally affirm our inner selves, saying “I see you. I know you as you really are, without the labels and judgments. Just you.” This is what Jesus offers us with his unconditional love. He gives us access to a source which says, “You are a person of great value to me,” even though he knows full well that we bite our fingernails, drink too much, judge others, work too hard or too little, love money too much, rest and worship too little, and feel totally unworthy a lot of the time. “I see you and love you as you are, and am here to save you,” Jesus says. “Here, take a drink.”

The other thing that most people thirst for, although they may not know it consciously, is meaning. When you fill your life with trying to meet external standards, you can be a success by those standards and still feel like your life lacks meaning because they aren’t the standards of your soul; likewise, when your life is so tragic that you can’t meet even external standards, then it can be tempting to wonder, “What’s the point of it all?” Thus according to Dr. James Hollis, an internationally recognized psychiatrist and Carl Jung expert, the people who are happiest in life are those who search for meaning, not for happiness or success.<sup>3</sup> Deep inside each of us there is a part that wonders, “Why am I here? What difference will my life make?” We can strive to fill our lives with all kinds of people and practices that make us happy, but still feel unconsciously very thirsty because we can’t answer those soul questions. Meanwhile, since happiness in many ways is fleeting, we have to go back to that well again and again searching for more “happy” to keep us going.

If we seek a meaningful life, however, or if we are blessed to discover it as Photini did, then we find that just knowing you have a purpose can sustain the soul through all kinds of situations. Even when we are not happy, even when life is challenging or scary or sad, we can still feel a kind of contentment that comes from having a thirsty soul quenched. “Meaning is an organ of the soul,” Hollis argues. “Most of the time we don’t listen to our souls.”<sup>4</sup> But when we find out how to fill our lives with meaning, then it’s like having a spring of living water bubbling inside because our souls feel heard and satisfied.

So where do we find that meaning? We find it where Photini did in Jesus. Our lives are not meant to be about endlessly striving to be perfect or pain-free or safe. They are meant to be about striving to transform our world for the better by sharing the love and grace of God. This is what Photini did. She didn’t say to Jesus, “Wow thanks for the water,” and skip off into the sunset after talking to him. She took in the living water Jesus gave her that made her feel valued and loved, and then made her life about helping others to feel this way too. If any of the legends about her post-biblical life are true, then it’s clear that her life did not get easier after she became an apostle. Just the opposite. But her soul’s joy was so great that people found it compelling

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<sup>2</sup> Hollis, James, *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life: How to Finally, Really Grow Up* (New York: Avery, 2006), 47.

<sup>3</sup> Hollis, James, *Living an Examined Life: Wisdom for the Second Half of the Journey* (Boulder: Sounds True, 2018), 69-73.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

enough to listen to her when they had previously avoided her, enough to name her “the enlightened one.” Like her we can find joy and fulfillment regardless of whether life is easy or hard, because we have within us a source of living water that will never run out: God’s unconditional love. Like her, we can change our world for the better with that love and God’s grace.

The people in the lifeboat were surrounded by life-giving water and didn’t know it. We are too, but sometimes we get so focused on trying to squeeze a little moisture out of other people and things that we forget, especially when life feels tragic and out of our control. So, listen to Photini today and rediscover the living water that Jesus offers us even “in the heat of the day” when we are social distancing. Come to the one who can tell you everything you’ve ever done and failed to do, and who loves you anyway. Come to the one who can make your life rich with meaning, and in so doing satisfy the thirst in your soul. God is with us, and even now inviting us to drink so that we may help others to do the same. Thanks be to God! Amen.