



## Sermon preached at the Thankoffering service, Tenth Triennial Gathering (2017), Minneapolis, Minnesota

By ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton

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Grace to you and peace from God our creator and from our savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well, here we are.

I must give a deep word of thanks to the worship planners for what has already been for me an ethereal and transformative experience. It's just been marvelous, the music, the dance, everything, so thank you for that work.

Now, the theme for this gathering is "All Anew," and I have actually encountered one of you who has tattooed on her arm the "All Anew" logo. There you are. So for anyone who thinks that Lutheran women are somehow a bunch of stogy people, they need only encounter a few gray-haired women who got ink done on their arms. That's commitment.

In looking at the readings or hearing the readings, hearing the beautiful water prayer being sung, we can see that water is a theme, and being renewed and refreshed certainly is a theme.

We take a look at the first lesson, we know that these people were thirsty. We know that they'd been traveling for quite a long time. We know that they were hoping to make it to wherever they were supposed to be going, but they were still trudging through this wilderness. I mean, I think the -- what we women would say, you know, had Miriam been leading the pack, she would have asked for instructions or directions much sooner, and it wouldn't have taken 40 years for the people to get to the promised land.

However, God, in God's infinite wisdom, knew that these people were going to need some time to come to the realization that their liberty, in fact their life, depended completely and utterly upon God. It took them 40 years, and it takes us a whole lot longer. That they were without food, that they were without water and had to wait for God to provide these things -- which God did in abundance -- was an important lesson, an important part of the formation of these people of God.

We already know that they complained about the food before we get to the water part, and here they are complaining about being killed in the wilderness from thirst. In other parts, the great story of the Exodus, they asked were there not graves enough in Egypt? And they say we are sick of this miserable food. You can hear them. Manna-shmanna. It's been going on for years now. We can't take it anymore. We want meat to eat. God promised. God fulfilled their needs absolutely. He sent the quails to cover the camp. He sent the food. And he told the people, trust me. Take what you need for you and your family for one day, not more and not less. Here again, trust me, God says. I will provide you for you water to drink so that you will not perish of thirst. You will not die in the wilderness.

Now, we know some people did not trust God, so they all gathered extra. And what happened the next morning? It was all rotted and filled with maggots. They get pretty graphic in scripture here. But then there were those who did not really trust that God loved them completely, and they only took half a measure of the food they were supposed to take. These were the Lutheran Israelites.

And truthfully, sisters, especially sisters, how many times do we feel that somehow we are not worthy enough or good enough or worth enough that we should take care of ourselves and trust in the complete, all-encompassing, completely satisfying love of God? But instead, decide that we are worthless and need to put ourselves always last, when God would have us be first with God, with our brothers as well. We turn into these Lutheran Israelites when we somehow think that we, as women, are not valuable or are not able somehow to be the ones who can proclaim this love of God, which is abundant and always present and always nourishing.

Well, we know the people of Israel made it finally to the promised land, and they settled there. But things did not go well on the whole existence, and we know by the time we get to the New Testament, listen to the gospel lesson, that the people of Israel had already been defeated with horrible defeats. Once when the northern kingdom of Israel was completely destroyed and the people set off, and we don't know where those tribes ended up. And later on in Judah, the southern kingdom was also destroyed, and the people were sent to the southern kingdom, Babylon.

The people of God are living under oppression. The Romans are calling the shots. What happens a lot of times? What happens when people feel pressured, when somehow forces beyond their control seem to be pressing down on them? What happens is I think the forces beyond our control or the powers that be set us one against another.

And so we have the story of Jesus doing this unthinkable thing. Unthinkable. That he, a Jew, would go straight through Samaria and would sit at a well, talk to a woman, and ask a Samaritan for something to drink. I mean, it's pretty close to -- I don't know what -- a Minnesota Viking asking a Green Bay Packer for -- (Laughter) -- you understand that here. (Laughter).

You see, when the northern kingdom was destroyed centuries before that, the people were dispersed, and their conquerors brought in foreign peoples, who married with the remnants, and from these people came the Samaritans. And the accusation from the Jews is that they had given up true worship of God. They built their temple on Mt. Gerizim. They were idolaters. They had perverted the faith. These people were beneath, beneath comment. And just about

160 years before Jesus' story here, the Jews had decided that they needed to get rid of this pernicious idolatry committed by the Samaritans within their sight, so the chief priest of the temple in Jerusalem burned down the temple of Samaritans.

We are not going to get on swimmingly, these two people, if we are burning each others' churches down. It's not a helpful thing. Also, Jesus -- usually the route for Jews, they could make their way around Samaria and not step on that polluted ground, not let the dust touch their feet that had been touched by these unclean Samaritans. But Jesus in the verse just before our lesson says "it is necessary that." And I think the necessity is not that Jesus was in a big hurry, but it was necessary that Jesus show all of us, Samaritans and Jews, all blue and red, that there is something higher and more important and more dope than anything that divides us as human beings, and that is the salvation that has come to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the purest, truest demonstration of God's love, an indescribable act of beauty that brings true and lasting joy.

So Jesus is coming through Samaria. He comes to the well. You've probably heard different iterations of this story. And all of my sisters who are pastors and deacons, don't correct me if I've got this wrong. He comes there, the disciples are hungry. So they go to a Samaritan town and are going to buy some Samaritan food because they were really, really hungry, though -- don't mind this, my brothers -- you know, it really doesn't platter. Adam was hungry. You know? And he forgot all the instruction he got from the Lord. He took that apple, ate it right up. Maybe the disciples were hungry too, so they went there, get some food. So here is Jesus. He is at this well, he is sitting down. This beautiful tableau of the deep humanity of Jesus, tired, dusty, thirsty, hot. And the Samaritan woman comes at noon. Now, noon in that part of the world is not a great time to come for water because it's hot. Usually one comes early in the morning to prepare for all the activities of the day or late in the cool of the afternoon. So everyone had been there to get the water except for the

Samaritan woman. And I have read a commentary, honest to goodness, that said, well, maybe she was just lazy and slept in and that's why she came at noon.

I am thinking if you are walking all those miles for water, you are not exactly lazy or sleeping in. But we don't know why this woman was here, and she starts to have -- to look at this Jesus, who speaks to her. Now, consider places in the world now where it is just considered to be unbelievably uncouth for a man to speak to a woman he does not know or a woman to a man she does not know in public. There are places in the world where that is simply not done. It's bad manners. It's scandalous. We are not use today that here. We talk to everybody, all of the time apparently.

But that was just not done. And Jesus was a Jew, a male, a Jew, addressing a Samaritan woman and asking her for water. Right there, we should stop and weep for joy because the Lord of all, the Lord of all in humility and in human need, is asking for something to take care of his physical need from a woman who would have no status in his culture or his society. But that's how God acts in Jesus. That's how God acts, making God vulnerability in Jesus, asking for water from this outcast woman. And she is pretty stunned. She says how is it that you, a Jew, are asking me a Samaritan for this kind of water? They would not drink out of each other's or use each other's dishes. That was just not done. And then Jesus starts, as so often happens in the gospel of John, these series of statements which elicit questions from the listener. And he

says if you knew who I was -- and we all know, we are in on the story. We know who he is. -- you'd ask for me to give you water and I'd give you living water or running water or fresh water.

This is a very practical woman. She says I don't see that you have a bucket anywhere, sir.

I don't know how you are going to get this water. And do you think you are better than our father, Jacob? Jacob, right, one of the patriarchs. So Jesus keeps on, bringing her closer and closer into the wonderful truth he is going to be revealed. It's an amazing thing. He says no, I will give you water, such water that you will never thirst again, living water. You will always be fulfilled, always. This woman's feisty. She's a little skeptical and also practical. She says great. You give me some of that water so I don't have to keep walking up here to this water, this well all the time.

It's interesting in these encounters, and particularly with this woman, that she feels completely at home engaging Jesus in questions and answers, that she doesn't just say oh, that's what you say. I am just going to sit back. She is giving it back and forth. She is encountering Jesus as an equal, and Jesus is treating

her as an equal dignified human being who deserves direct answers, as he continues to reveal this miracle of the life that we have in Christ.

So, she might not be understanding what he is talking about by this "living water." It might have been completely foreign to her. But I want us to think a little bit about the way we speak, and not just Lutheran speak, but Christian speak. And when we encounter someone who has never, ever been to church before and we start talking about justification and sanctification and grace and the second use of the law, do you think they might be a little confused about what we are talking about? I once assigned the ministerium of the -- oh, my gosh. Where is Mary -- not South-Central. It's one of those Wisconsin synods. There are so many of you people. East Central synod of Wisconsin. I was there with pastors and deacons.

Thank you. We believe we have good news to share. I want you to formulate a tweet -- which is 140 characters and spaces, I found out, got to count the spaces, and in fact, the first couple of times I tweeted, I didn't know there was a feature that counted it for you, so I wrote it out and counted every letter and space. (Laughter): You develop a tweet in 140 characters that tells somebody about the love that we've experienced in God and Jesus Christ, and you may not use the word: Sin, justification, grace, repentance. None of that. No one could do it. And I think we need to try to figure that out. Jesus might have been seeming to speak in riddles, but he unpacked that for her. We just assume people know what we are talking about.

I don't know, those of you who have taught confirmation class, or those of us who have had confirmation classes or come to confirm these dear young people, you sometimes go through this exercise of asking them why do you want to be confirmed? Have you ever done that? And once you get past, well, my parents are making me and that sort of thing you might get some sort of thing. I had this one young girl in my eighth grade we confirmed at the end of the eighth-grade year, Angie, and she had moved up to Ashtabula because things were really dicey at home and she needed to live with her aunt to have a break for a while because of her home situation. Angie had not been raised a Lutheran. She was barely raised in a Christian home because that was just something they did. But she had friends -- get this -- that brought her to catechism to class. There is a miracle there. Every time they brought more friends, they kept

looking for the Lord to be returning in glory.

I asked Angie, why do you want to be confirmed? She said you know, there is a lot of craziness out there in the world, and I just want to be part of the light.

She was able to say how Jesus had affected her.

And not in any way that somehow denigrated or castigated someone who did not come to her understanding, but this genuine understanding that life didn't make sense without Jesus, and she just wanted to be a part of that. That's how we have to learn to talk to people who have never had the chance to hear the good news of Jesus.

What will we do and how will we speak to this unbelieving world? And there's another part of this. This woman at the well, I bet she didn't even know that she needed what Jesus was answering. And sometimes we get -- I'll say -- I get to be the same way. Michael Poland wrote this book *In Defense of Food*. And he talked about how we've ruined food, just ruined it. I don't mean by putting butter in it. That's probably good. But Twinkies, that's not really a food substance. Then we have all these things. You put vitamins in your water, instead of just having water and eating vegetables. We enhance milk, all of these things. He said we are starving ourselves.

So we are eating all of these empty calories until we are full, but at the same time, we are starving to death because we don't know what we really need. It's like being -- not even realize you are hungry until you smell bread baking. Right? And then all of a sudden you realize you are hungry. It's like being -- not realizing you are thirsty until the water is there rushing before her. She did not even know that she needed this gift of life Jesus was answering her. It's an amazing thing.

So Jesus keeps coming toward her and explaining this, and finally she is getting the idea that this Jesus is not just your regular Jewish fellow stopping by in Samaria. He is something special. And then he questions her about her husbands, and this is where also commentators say she must have been a woman of loose morals. There is nowhere in this passage that explains why her previous five husbands are not there. Could she have buried five husbands? Could she have gone through that grief five times?

Could these five previous husbands been abusive so she wasn't sure she wanted to get married again? We jump to these conclusions about people who have already been cast as the other that they somehow deserve the state that they are in. And this, I think, is also how the powers that be set us one against another, in this case Samaritan against Jew, or I would say right now in our current culture, red against blue states. But that's not what Jesus does. Jesus gives her this living water, and she realized that she had been thirsty. And when she drinks of this living water, when she received the spirit, when we are all anew together, then we realize that we have been given the water that will never run out, that will never be depleted, that we have been filled, that we are satisfied with this pure love that God has sent to us in Jesus Christ.

Think about it. We don't always know we are hungry until we smell baking bread, and in a little while, we will realize that we don't always understand or know that we are spiritually hungry until we take the broken bread. All of us sisters and brothers, I would say, yearn for something. And the something that we yearn for is this complete love of God, who knows us completely and loves us absolutely. And we are given that love day in, day out, over and over again. It's as close to us as our own breath. And filled, filled with that food, the living bread from heaven, filled with that water,

the living water. We now are free to go to all of those who do not even know they are hungry or thirsty and say come and buy bread without price and come to the waters and drink. We are all anew, and because we are new and free, we can bring that refreshment to the world God so loves.