

Why do you follow Jesus? Most Christians' answer would read something like the Nicene Creed. Jesus is the only Son of God. He was born of a virgin and is fully God and fully human. He lived among us teaching and performing miracles. He died for us and was resurrected on the third day. He gives his Holy Spirit to those who believe in him.

But what if you had met Jesus during his earthly life? Jesus drew very different responses from people he encountered. Some loved him and followed him unto death. Some followed him until the going got tough, then abandoned him. Others were furious with his teachings and practices and sought to kill him. Would you have followed him? If so, why? You wouldn't have known how the story would end. You wouldn't have had the New Testament to tell you what the story means. The people who followed Jesus during his earthly life likely had quite different reasons for doing so than many of us.

In our Gospel reading, we have a remarkable account of a Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus. Jesus is traveling through Samaria with his disciples. He waits at Jacob's well while they go into town to purchase lunch. It is hot and Jesus is thirsty. Violating local custom, he asks a woman drawing water at the well for a drink. Caught by surprise, she questions his motives. Jesus immediately takes their discussion of thirst to a whole new level: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." Their conversation escalates in intensity and intimacy. Jesus sees this woman very deeply and goes straight to the heart of her personal issues. She sees him deeply, too, discerning he is the Messiah, which he has of yet revealed to no one in this Gospel. As a result of this brief encounter, the woman and her whole village accept that Jesus is the Savior of the world.

It is all too easy when reading the Bible to esteem the text without truly taking it to heart. Put yourself in the Samaritan woman's place. There's probably a reason she's drawing water alone in the heat of the day rather than early in the morning with the women of her village. Perhaps she is isolated by infertility, addiction, or just plain terrible luck. A foreign male who by social convention should not even speak to her asks a favor. Within minutes he's talking to her about some "gift of God" and offering her "living water." If a total stranger had pulled this line on me, I probably would have hightailed it out of there! Yet this woman recognizes something in Jesus that draws her more deeply into communion.

I feel a kinship to this Samaritan woman because my initial encounter with Jesus was, like hers, unexpected and transformative. My parents were Baptists when I was born, but when I was seven, they stopped attending church and I received no further religious instruction. In my late teens, I got involved with radical politics and feminism. After a few years, my idealism soured. I thought maybe travel would help me find myself, so I

wandered the country for nearly a year in an ever more precarious emotional state. Realizing my need for help, my mother took me in. A few years later, I was fairly stable emotionally, but was now a single mom barely able to make ends meet. I considered myself agnostic but was desperate enough to begin taking a serious look at spirituality. Somehow a book by the Catholic monk Thomas Merton made its way into my hands. I knew zip about Christianity and could not possibly have understood Merton's dense mystical prose. But something about the way he wrote of Jesus drew me into prayer, and a fire was kindled in my heart that has never died away. I found a church, became an official Christian, and acquired the trappings of doctrine and belief. I was crazy in love with Jesus and in many ways with my new Christian community. But the theology I was being taught sent me into a downward spiral of confusion and guilt. After several turbulent decades, a trip to the Middle East brought up theological questions for which I could find no answers. I finally gave up trying to make sense of Christianity as I knew it then. For ten years I did not attend church until a fortuitous meeting with Fr. Jimmy a few years back landed me at Holy Comforter. But the Presence I encountered in those early days of prayer—that I never gave up on even for a minute. From those days, my heart has well and truly belonged to Jesus.

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” Does Jesus still offer this gift now? Absolutely. It was this gift which bound me to Christ well before I had a clue about Christian theology and kept me bound to him when my belief system collapsed. Many of you have encountered God in ways that are difficult to describe in words but you know are very real. I do not believe we can know this gift of God through creed alone. Doctrine is not enough. Tradition is not enough. These inform our seeking, but are not in themselves living water. Reverencing Jesus as a distant object of worship is not knowing the gift of God. What Jesus offers us here is his very Spirit, his very Self dwelling in and among us, an intimate, abundant, present-tense fountain of love and life which continuously heals, transforms, and empowers us to trust our Lord and to follow him faithfully forever.

Jesus's teachings are very radical and very challenging. Without living water we may talk the talk, but there is no way we're able to consistently walk the walk. How, then, do we receive God's gift? How do we partake of living water? Thirst is one condition. We may safely assume the Samaritan woman's life was stressful and unmanageable the day she came upon Jesus at the well, as was mine when I first encountered Jesus. Most of us are pretty stressed out and could use some divine help, so this isn't a hard requirement to meet! Attention is another condition. If we're too busy or self-absorbed to turn aside for a burning bush or a stranger who asks a favor, we may well miss God's gifts. Some sort of spiritual practice that draws us closer to Christ is critical. Church

attendance is a good place to start, but most of us also need daily prayer, meditation, study, journaling, or spending time in nature to keep our spiritual wells flowing.

A powerful way to drink the living water Jesus offers is to take his love commandment seriously. It is in relationships that spiritual rubber meets the road. How we treat people says a lot more about our spirituality than what we claim we believe. Maybe you're like me. I begin each day by dedicating myself to love—and most days fall flat on my face well before breakfast, at least where my thoughts are concerned. My failed attempts to love used to cause discouragement and guilt. I'm learning to draw on the gift of God with empty hands and a thirsty heart, and to rely on Christ's fountain within to enable me to love in ways that are impossible on my own.

"If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The Samaritan woman responds, "Sir, give me this water." She and Jesus keep talking. He doesn't meet her request in any obvious way. And yet there is something about the way she leads her village to Jesus that makes me believe she did indeed receive a life-changing gift.

There are multitudes of spiritually thirsty people in the world. Some have never formally embraced a faith tradition. Some used to participate in religious services, but found their tradition boring, irrelevant, or even cruel. Some of the thirsty may be sitting here in the pews tonight. In a world with so many competing interests, dry religion stands little chance of attracting or holding people's attention. We need living encounters with the blazingly beautiful God of Love if we are to be spiritually vibrant, healthy, and attractive. We may not encounter a burning bush. An angel may not appear ordering us not to be afraid right before delivering a message which blasts life as we know it to smithereens. But the hope of Advent is Emmanuel, God with us. In the beginning, now, and forever, divine love through Christ is born in and as our everyday lives. To the heart wide open to wonder and love, every place is holy ground; every moment is sacred time.

Drawing water at Jacob's well was an ordinary, tedious task the Samaritan woman performed countless times. Yet one day, this ordinary task opened into an extraordinary divine encounter. The gift of living water which heals the broken heart and satisfies the thirsty soul was offered and received. Jesus offers us Love's gift now and forever. With the Samaritan woman, let each of us respond: "Sir, give me this water!" With the Samaritan woman, let each of us drink with gratitude and gladness.