

Grace©**John 4:5-28****March 23, 2014****Rev. Sharlyn Gates**

I love this story of the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus is there to get a drink and the woman comes there too. It is noon. An odd time for a woman to go out to the well. Most of the women go early in the morning when it is cooler. They go together. But this woman goes by herself in the heat of the day.

But what a blessing for her! Here she encounters Jesus who first asks her for a drink, which is amazing to her. "Why would you, a man – a Jewish man – talk to me? A woman. A Samaritan woman? (The Jews went out of their way to avoid Samaria. They looked at the people as low class, not true in their religion. They distained the Samaritans, actually).

But Jesus being Jesus, of course, had a long discussion with this woman. He told her that if she asked him for a drink, he would give her living water and she would never be thirsty again. She was ready for that! If she could take it literally she would never have to make that jaunt to the well again.

But then they had a great discussion about the right place to worship – they discussed their differences! Jesus assures her that soon it wouldn't matter where she worshipped but it was a matter of the Spirit. A heart thing. You can worship anywhere!

This woman was amazed when Jesus knew about her past too – that she had been married 5 times but the man she was with now was not her husband. She ended up believing that Jesus was the Messiah and running into the village to tell the others who came to see for themselves.

This seems such a simple stated story, yet at the core of it is a woman who has a great thirst for the spiritual. We don't know her situation – why she had been married so many times – the why isn't all that important, is it? The point is that she had been through a lot in life and perhaps she was at the well alone because she was shunned by the others.

Maybe she was thirsty for compassion, for understanding, for someone to say she was worth something still. What she got with Jesus was all that, along with grace.

What is grace?

Grace is that sweet flood of relief when you think there is no way out and you know there is nothing you can do. Grace comes in many ways and through many different means. But it is always a gift. That's what makes it grace. You didn't and couldn't earn it or make it happen. It is pure gift.

Think of it this way: If you take out a loan you might be told you have a period of time before you have to start paying it back. That's called a "grace period." Or consider that you have a debt and the person you owe decides to cut the debt in half – or forgive it altogether. That's grace!

Jesus showing interest in this woman was grace. Talking to her about religion, especially a man – a Jewish man – talking to a Samaritan woman. Grace! Seeing deep into her past and knowing about her life and showing her care – even to the point of telling her he IS the Messiah! How many times did he not quite say who he was to so many others? Grace!

So how do you fit into this story? Is there something in your past you would just as soon Jesus not see? Are you ready to argue with him about worship or some other issue rather than talk about yourself? I sometimes think our struggles with worship styles and music are at least in part, about focusing on one thing that seems important when the more important is focusing on our spirits.

Are you thirsty ... really, really dry thirsty for something spiritual to ignite a new flame within your heart?

This is a good time to be thirsty, you know. Lent is about thirst, in a way. It's about the wilderness wanderings – searching for renewal, for that "living water" to fill our cups maybe for the first time, or maybe again for the umpteenth time.

How is your Lenten Journey going? Have you decided to give something up that you especially like? Are you fasting from something? Or have you decided on a Discipline to focus on this Lent?

I admit to having a difficult time deciding on what to do. I'm not perfect at it, but I do try to leave alone the foods that I know I love most but are so bad for me. Refined sugar and flour are at the top of the list. Of course, Sundays are the most difficult and I usually cave in because I haven't eaten much before worship and – well – it's there in front of me. But all week, I am disciplined for the most part.

But to do that for Lent wouldn't be that different than any other time in my life. And I do all that to try to feel good and not gain more weight. I don't want Lent to be about dieting for me.

This Lent, I'm trying to be disciplined in writing. I love to write but I procrastinate so much. Oh, of course I write sermons and newsletter articles and little posts on Facebook and lots and lots of emails.

But I want to write more. Reflections on things spiritual. I even want to write a novel but will need to be more disciplined than I am to ever get that done.

For Lent, my discipline is to write for at least 30 minutes each night. That means not staying up late watching television or reading a book. (So I guess that is what I'm giving up). It means being here and being mindful of the time and my commitment. It means praying for inspiration. It means keeping my 3D Lenten Vision in tact. To keep focused on how I believe Jesus calls me to be a disciple; to be mindful of my devotion to the Lord – how my heart fills up for him, how I continue to study and meditate on His Word; and to dialog with him – to pray, to talk to him throughout the day.

I am thirsty. Thirsty to be flooded with living water but when I bury my face in a book or zone out on television, I won't recognize the water if it's poured over me.

I have a longing to be closer to Jesus. To be filled anew with the thirst-quenching water of life. I have known the sweet relief of grace pouring over me when I didn't deserve it, when I thought things were hopeless, when I had no place to turn – there was grace. Forgiveness, compassion, hope, love, understanding, a new beginning.

How about you? Are you thirsty for something more? Are you longing for rest and renewal, for compassion, for understanding? Are you hiding behind issues that we make so important so we don't have to reveal what we really feel or who we really are?

Are you being mindful of your Lenten 3D vision: Discipleship, Devotion and Dialog?

The good news is that whoever you are, whatever you fear, whatever it is that you regret or feel guilty over or ashamed of, whatever you feel is hopeless – there is grace. Jesus comes to you and offers you a cup of forgiveness, a cup of hope, a cup of understanding, a cup that is full and overflowing with grace. Sheer, pure, life-giving grace!

I pray we will all be filled with the living water Jesus offers us as we journey to the cross and to the empty tomb.

I invite you to listen or to sing along with this beautiful, heartfelt song by Michael W. Smith. It's titled Grace ...

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