

Leroy Seat: Where Is Your Water Jar?

Sermon preached by Leroy Seat at Seekers Church,
February 27, 2005

Where Is Your Water Jar?

It is a real joy and an honor to have this opportunity to speak to you here at Seekers Church this morning. My wife June and I have attended Seekers a number of times with Keith and Brenda, our son and daughter-in-law, but this is the first time I have had the opportunity to speak here. I first heard of the [Church of the Savior](#) more than 40 years ago when I was in seminary. I attended the same seminary as Gordon Cosby, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. (Some of you who know only of Southern Baptists over the last few years may wonder if anything good can come out of the SBC.) Gordon graduated from Southern in 1942, exactly 20 years before I did. I did not realize that when I first heard about Church of the Savior, it had started just about 15 years before and with only nine members. In addition, I was surprised so see on your website that this is already the tenth year since Seekers became an independent church. Happy anniversary!□

For the first time in my life, I am preaching today from the [lectionary](#) – and, of all things, I will be doing the same thing next week at the First Baptist Church in Mars Hill, NC. One major “disadvantage” of using the lectionary for an itinerant preacher as I am now, is that next week I will not be able to use the same sermon as today, which I would likely

have done otherwise. As a lifelong “low church” Baptist, I have never wanted to be restricted to pre-determined Bible passages in my preaching. Some preachers, I hear, have trouble deciding what to preach about, but fortunately, I have never had that problem. My problem has usually been having far more I wanted to talk about than I had the Sundays available for preaching.

I have come to realize, though, that even though the Bible passages are determined by the lectionary, there is considerable freedom in what the preacher does with those passages. For example, on January 16 when Deborah Sokolove [spoke here](#) at Seekers, June and I attended the St. Phillips in the Hills Episcopal Church in Tucson, Arizona, where our youngest daughter lives. The assistant rector of that large church preached a sermon with the same title as Deborah’s, “Come and See.” Her sermon was based on the same Bible passage, the first chapter John, which was the lectionary reading from the Gospels for that day. It was a very fine sermon, as was Deborah’s, but the content of those two sermons was very different. I was happy to be able to print off Deborah’s sermon from the Internet to read-and I wonder what your responses were to the sculpture *Christa*, which she introduced. Her point was this: “wherever women are being abused, there Christ is still being crucified.” This reminded me of the book *Jesus, the Crucified People* by C. S. Song from Taiwan, one of the Asian theologians I admire the most. Christ is still being crucified in many parts of the world today.

I

Now, here we are on the third Sunday in Lent, thinking about the theme of compassion in general and particularly about the

story of the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well from the Gospel passage in today's lectionary reading. Many of you have read this passage many, many times-and perhaps you have seen paintings based on this passage. I have three pictures, which I would like for you to view now. The first is a black and white illustration called "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman" drawn by Gustave Doré (1832~83) in 1865. Doré is said to have been the most popular and successful French book illustrator of the mid-19th century, and he became widely known because of his illustrations for such books as Dante's *Inferno*, *Don Quixote* and the Bible. The second painting is by a Danish artist, Carl Bloch (1834~1890), and it is entitled "Woman at the Well."

The third painting is by a contemporary British artist, Simon Dewey (b. 1962), who specializes in painting pictures of Jesus. This is called "Living Water" and it was painted in 2001. What is your reaction to these paintings? Somehow, this third one does not seem to be as appealing to me as the first two. However, they all three depict clearly the serious dialogue which took place between Jesus and the Samaritan women at Jacob's well. (In passing, maybe you would like to note that Jacob's well, which was dug somewhere about 3,800 years ago, still can be seen today. I have not seen it, but here is a photo someone took at that site in 1999.)

Today's OT teaching, Exodus 17:1-7, and the Gospel reading I am using for this sermon both include requests for water. This is something that is not so easily understood, perhaps, by those of us who live in metropolitan areas like Washington, D.C.- or in Japan where I lived for 38 years. Especially in Japan, rains are plentiful, for the most part, and water is quite abundant. Nevertheless, it is different in the desert country-like around and Tucson, Arizona, where June and I spent eight days in January. In the desert, water is scarce-and thus, far

more appreciated, perhaps, than in areas where there is a lot of rain and a lot of water.

Palestine is a dry country, as you know, and so it is not surprising that there are numerous references in the Bible to thirst and to water which quenches thirst. In the Old Testament, in addition to the passage in Exodus 17, there are the well-known words that God spoke through the prophet Isaiah:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, / Come to the waters;

. . . .

Incline your ear, and come to me;

Listen, so that you may live. (55:1a, 3)

In *Revelation*, the last book of the Bible, again we find the invitation to those who are thirsty to come to receive the gift of water.

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. (Rev. 22:17:b)

II

It was in this dry land where water was scarce and where people were often thirsty that Jesus sat by the ancient well of Jacob in the village of Sychar in the territory of Samaria.

Therefore, Jesus is sitting there tired and thirsty when a local woman comes with her water jar to draw water from the ancient well-and Jesus does a surprising thing: he asks her for a drink of water. You have, no doubt, heard many times how in Jesus' day men did not talk in public places with women who were not family members, and you know how Jewish people looked down upon Samaritans and did not talk with them if they could avoid it. However, here Jesus engages the Samaritan woman as a true conversation partner. He engages in dialogue with her that is not just an over/under relationship. Moreover, and this is quite remarkable, this Samaritan woman was the first person Jesus revealed his identity to, according to John.

Your theme here at Seekers for this season is *compassion*, and here we see how Jesus shows compassion to this woman-by his willingness to consider her as a true conversation partner and to enter into dialogue with her. *Compassion*, as you know, comes from Latin words that literally mean *to suffer with*. Thus, compassion is somewhat different from pity, which connotes an attitude of someone in a superior position expressed toward someone in an inferior position.

The Japanese word equivalent to *pity* is disliked by most Japanese Christians because of this connotation. Almost 30 years ago, the Baptists in southwest Japan opened a new institution called Hisayama Ryoikuen, a care facility for severely physically and mentally challenged people. Institutions like this have been rare in a society that considers severe handicaps to be the result of bad *karma*-and embarrassments that should be kept under cover at home. (This attitude is not much different from the understanding of most of the Jewish people in Jesus' day, as we see in the lectionary reading for next week from the Gospel of John.)

One of the key emphases from the beginning in the campaign on various levels to open Hisayama Ryoikuen was the emphasis on doing things *with* rather than *for* those who would be living in the new facility. In Japanese this difference is aptly

expressed by using the words *tomo ni* rather than *tame ni*. Hisayama Ryoikuen also adopted for its slogan the German words *mit Leben*. This is not an accurate German phrase, I am told, but it is supposed to mean *living with*. This is a very important concept, but one that is very hard to put into practice. It is much easier for those with more money than time – perhaps that is the situation most of us here are in – to give of our money with pity than to give of our time with compassion. Nevertheless, the latter is of much greater importance.

Perhaps Jesus did not have much money or time either, but he clearly had compassion on the women who came to the well there in Sychar, and he used his physical need for water to talk, compassionately, with the women who needed the spiritual help that Jesus could provide.

Let us read again a few verses from today's Gospel passage: John 4:27~30, reading from the new translation/paraphrase known as *The Message*.

²⁷Just then his disciples came back. They were shocked. They could not believe he was talking with that kind of a woman. No one said what they were all thinking, but their faces showed it.

²⁸The woman took the hint and left. In her confusion, she left her water pot. Back in the village she told the people,
²⁹“Come see a man who knew all about the things I did, who knows me inside and out. Do you think this could be the Messiah?” ³⁰And they went out to see for themselves.

The disciples were shocked when they saw Jesus talking with a Samaritan woman, whom they did not even know. Moreover, she,

no doubt, had a bad reputation in the village among people that did know her. That is probably why she came to the well at noon, rather than in the cool of the morning, which was more usual. Since she was a woman who had been married five times and living with a sixth man who was not her husband, it is most likely the “prim and proper” women of Sychar were not particularly friendly toward her, to say the least.

In spite of her reputation and what in that society would have been a severe social handicap, after talking with Jesus she soon sets off for the city and seeks out people in order to say to them, “Come see” This leads me to ask you here at Seekers Church – what, or whom, are you seeking? I do not think I have ever heard all of the reason behind this church being called *Seekers*. I have assumed that it is related to seeking the dynamic inner journey / outer journey, and that emphasis is certainly very good and important. I am sure your name has often been linked often to seeking truth with what has been called a healthy agnosticism. Like Michael Crichton says in his “Author’s Message” at the end of *State of Fear* (p. 573), I’m certain there is too much certainty in the world, especially in the religious world, and there needs to be much more honest seeking of Truth. In addition, no doubt part of the intention in the original name is linked to Jesus’ words: “seek first God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness” (Matthew 6:33).

I have wondered if you are also seeking other people in what is generally called *evangelism*. Of course, I realize what a bad name “*evangelism*” is, and especially *evangelical* and *evangelicalism*, has at this time, particularly as seen in its fundamentalist wing. That is one of the main reasons why I am in the process of writing a book entitled *Fed Up with Fundamentalism*. I also realize that “political correctness” means accepting other people are without trying to persuade them to do differently or to be different than they are now.

And yet Jesus Christ, whom we Christians claim to follow as

Lord, said of himself with reference to Zaccheus, “**the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost**” (Luke 19:10). I still believe that that is what he wants us to do, not in any imperialistic, high-handed way, but as the Sri Lankan theologian D. T. Niles said many years ago, as “one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread”- or like the woman at the well did. She went back to the city seeking people and urging them to come and see-and they did. Look at this painting, “Christ and the Samaritan Woman” by Sébastien Bourdon (1616~1671) now.

III

I have no idea how many times in my life I have read this passage from the fourth chapter of John – dozens or probably scores of times. Nevertheless, I cannot ever remember noticing the words in verse 28 about the woman leaving her water jar at the well when she hurried back to the city. I certainly cannot ever remember wondering what the significance of that was. However, the first time I read the lectionary readings in preparation for today’s message, these words seemed to jump out at me – and I am not sure why. Nor am I sure why that was something important enough for the author of this Gospel to include in this narrative.

So, what are some reasons for which we might assume the woman left her water jar?

1. Maybe she left in such haste to go back to the village that she just forgot her water jar. – But why would that be worth mentioning? Was it something like the man who sold everything to obtain the pearl of great price, as Jesus told about in one of his parables? Maybe, but I am not at all sure that is the reason.
2. Maybe she forgot her water jar because of her

“confusion,” as *The Message* suggests. I enjoy reading this new paraphrased translation of the Bible – but we must always recognize that paraphrases contain much subjective interpretation. That is what makes them interesting, but that is what also makes them misleading at times. What was the woman confused about? She was not sure that Jesus was the Messiah, but she was sure enough that she wanted to tell the people back in town that Jesus was someone they might want to check out, too.

3. Maybe she knew she would be back shortly, so she just left her water jar where she knew she would need it again. After all, if you are going to be running off inviting people to “come and see,” there is no use lugging a water jar with you. Nevertheless, why would that have been important enough for John to mention?

I believe there is probably a more symbolic meaning here – and, as most of you know, John, far more than the other Gospel writers, uses symbolic language often. This woman left her water jar at the feet of Jesus, for she recognized that from now on that was going to be where she would get the “living water.” She left her water jar there where Jesus was, for she perceived that that was going to be the ongoing source of her spiritual sustenance. Her water jar, then, is a symbol of openness to God and the desire to receive nourishment from God’s Spirit. Isn’t this what we all need to do: to lay our “water jar” at the feet of Jesus and to lift up our cup of need to Him?

Back in the '70s, I had an old reel to reel tape with gospel songs sung by a woman whose name was JoAnn Shelton, I believe it was, and one of the songs I remember best was “Fill My Cup, Lord,” based on today’s Bible passage. Do you know these words?

Like the woman at the well, I was seeking
For things that could not satisfy:
And then I heard my Savior speaking:
“Draw from my well that never shall run dry.”.

Fill my cup Lord,
I lift it up, Lord!
Come and quench this thirsting of my soul;
Bread of heaven, Feed me till I want no more
Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole!

This month I read this little book by Emilie Barnes, whom I was surprised to see was recently listed in a new book, *100 Christian Women Who Changed the 20th Century*. This book is entitled *Fill My Cup, Lord*, but it does not refer to the gospel song by the same name. It is a fine devotional book, though, and it closes with a powerful prayer. Please listen carefully as I read it, and see if you can make this your prayer, too.

Fill my cup, Lord.

I hold it up to you with outstretched hands,

My heart parched and thirsty for your living water.

Fill my cup with your love, Lord.

Help me to feel your hands holding mine,

feel your arms around me, feel your love empowering me.

Fill me with quietness and encouragement
and trust.

Help me to live for you when trials,
difficulties,

and storms hit me and those I love
so deeply.

Help me not to give up when giving up seems
easier.

Help me to trust you when I don't feel like
trusting anymore.

When I know pain, fill my cup with prayer.

Teach me the secrets of service and
surrender.

Fill my cup, Lord. I lift it up to you.

Lift me up to do your will with love and
sacrifice,

Never forgetting what you sacrificed for
me-

Your Son.

My Messiah.

My Lord Jesus
Christ.

Help me, Lord, to accept where I am now.

Help me to know I'm not stuck forever in my
circumstances.

Help me remember that the windows do open

and that fresh breezes do blow in

and that living
water forever flows

and

that those who ask receive.

I'm asking, now, Lord.

I'm holding my cup in my hands,

And I'm asking you to fill it . . . with
you.

. . . .

And when my cup springs a leak,

As earthen vessels are prone to do.

Then I'll just have to ask again,

Trusting in your love

To fill me again . . .

Amen

So the question I want you to consider in conclusion this morning is this: Where is your water jar? Some of you may have left your water jar at some place in the past and largely forgotten about it. Others may be taking their water jar here and there-going from place to place or to one *guru* after another- seeking sustenance. Still others, like Emilie Barnes, may be bringing your water jar regularly to the feet of Jesus, the source of living water.

Where is your water jar?