



**Sermon delivered on February 24, 2008
in Soweto, South Africa
by ELCIC National Bishop Susan C. Johnson**

John 4:5-42

It is such a privilege and honour to be with you this morning and to be given the opportunity to preach. I bring you greetings from you sisters and brothers in Christ who will be listening to this gospel lesson six and seven and eight and nine and ten hours from now!!

I've been thinking a lot about thirst this week. One of the things that has become clear to me is that there are different levels of thirst. There is a very low level of thirst where you aren't even aware of being thirsty and either you drink something because it happens to be set in front of you or else you seek out something to drink acting only on automatic pilot. As you drink, you may not even be aware that your thirst is being quenched.

At the next level, you might be aware of thirst, but it isn't enough to make you get out of bed or leave your armchair to go in search of something to drink. Or there is a higher level of thirst that only involves your mouth. It happens when you have a head cold and can't breathe out of your nose, and so your mouth dries out, and you wake up and your mouth is so dry it hurts.

Then there is a full body thirst that you experience after you've been out exercising or working in the hot sun and it no longer is just your mouth that is dry, but indeed every single cell in your body cries out in thirst. And the truth of the matter is, that when you experience thirst like this, it's already too late - you're dehydrated.

So there are different LEVELS of thirst - but it has also become clear to me that there are different KINDS of thirst as well. There is the normal kind of thirst that is part of the way our bodies function as we require fluids to replenish our cells, and be used by our bodies in countless ways. There is the kind of thirst that is more like a craving when you want a very specific taste in your mouth. Then there is the kind of addiction that we still label as thirst, when what you want to drink is coffee, but it is really the caffeine you need, or what you want to drink is beer and it is really the alcohol that you are after.

And then there is the thirst that we experience at a very deep level, the thirst of our souls, a thirst that cries out for connection with God, a thirst that cries out for purpose and meaning in life, a thirst that cries out for affirmation and approval and a sense that we are worth something.

Another thing I've thought about this week is the way we get the different levels and kinds of

thirst confused, and how easy it is to try and satisfy one kind of thirst with the wrong kind of answer. So we can end up trying to quench our thirst for meaning in life by turning to alcohol. Or we forget about our bodies needing for ordinary water, and because it doesn't taste good, or it's too boring, we try to substitute other beverages instead.

This is the reality and challenge we face where I come from in North America. Our consumer society offers people all kinds of things they are told they need and that by having them they will be complete, whole, happy and content. In other words, our society offers up things to try to quench the deep spiritual thirst that exists.

In the Gospel lesson today there is also a mix up between Jesus and the Samaritan woman over what kind of thirst they were talking about and what it would take to fill it. Although Jesus begins by asking for ordinary drinking water, he soon is talking about something entirely different. And it takes the Samaritan woman awhile to catch on. Jesus is talking about the thirst of our souls, the thirst for meaning and purpose in life, the thirst for connection with God, the thirst for love and acceptance and purpose and fulfilment. And he knows that there is only one thing that will quench this thirst, and it isn't going to be found in the well they are standing beside, it isn't going to be found in any fridge, it isn't going to be found in any bottle or container that you can buy anywhere in the world. It is a thirst that can only be quenched by **living** water. And that living water can be obtained only through Jesus alone.

Do you know what kind of water he is talking about? Of course you do! The water that Jesus is talking about is the living, life-giving water of baptism. The water that connects us with God like invisible baptismal glue! The water that gives us purpose and meaning for our lives. The water that lets us know of the love and acceptance of God. The living water that transforms us and makes us new creations, children of God, members of God's family, part of the body of Christ.

You all know what that is all about, for you've all been to the baptismal waters. Yes, we've all been there, but does that mean we never thirst again? Unfortunately no, it does not. We all still go through periods of dryness, periods of spiritual wastelands, when it seems that the living water has all dried up and gone away. What has happened? Where has it gone? You heard what Jesus promised the Samaritan woman - "The water I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." How many of us feel filled with a spring of water? How many of us are gushing? What has happened?

There are many reasons for the dryness – personal challenges and tragedies – sickness, the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, depression – any of these can lead us to periods of spiritual dryness, of feeling cut off or abandoned by God.

I think that as we experience the dryness we tend to blame God. We say that God has taken the living water and gone away, abandoning us to thirst. But we know that that is not the case. God is still with us. The water is still there. But somehow we've squashed it all deep down inside us so that we no longer feel its presence. We've capped the spring, and hidden the water in underground storage tanks. Perhaps we only occasionally sip from it, but never enough to really

quench our thirst. We end up being like the ancient mariner, “water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink”. Or as a recent song puts it “standing knee deep in a river and dying of thirst.” Our Lord has provided us with the living water. It came to us in our baptism. But the old adage is true... you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make it drink. God provides us with living water, but God doesn’t force feed us.

Somehow, we have become scared of the water. We are afraid of drinking it deeply. Afraid that it might change our lives too radically. Afraid that we might drown as it gushes up inside of us. And probably we are afraid with good reason. Because living water is powerful, it’s dangerous - at least it’s dangerous if you want to stay in control of your life. It’s dangerous if you want to keep things status quo. Why is it so dangerous? Because the living water brings change - it transforms us. Drink deeply of living water and you might find yourself doing things you never thought you would do or even wanted to do. Like the Samaritan woman. A sip of that living water and she became an evangelist to her whole town. And if it happened to her, a WOMAN, and a SAMARITAN, it could happen to you or I as well. Drink deeply of that living water and the next thing you know you might start sharing your faith, doing more community service, increasing your tithe, loving your neighbour, spending more time daily in prayer, leaving an abusive relationship, going to seminary, reconciling with those you are estranged from, or any number of other wild and dangerous behaviours.

This transformation is scary stuff. No wonder we want to use this water so sparingly, only dabbing it on as we baptize, using it like some kind of spiritual towellette.

Well my friends, I have a confession to make to you. I’m thirsty. I need to drink deeply again. I need to open myself up to this wonderful gift of living water. I need to get wet. I need to risk opening up that shut-off valve deep inside me, the one I use to try to keep that transforming water at a safe distance. I need to let the living water once again rise up inside of me, to wash over me and carry me closer to God. I need to ride with its current and respond to others around me in the midst of their own dryness and need.

Maybe that’s what you need too. Maybe that is what this time of Lent is for. Time to re-examine our lives. Time to acknowledge the dry places in our lives and our need for God. Time to open ourselves up again to the living water that God provides. May it be so for you and for me.

Amen.