“The Samaritan Woman at the Well”

John 4:5-42

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By Sister Teresa Tuite, OP
A Communion Meditation delivered by Sister Teresa Tuite, OP

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I first want to thank you for welcoming me into your community. I consider it a very special invitation and an honor to worship with you.

In our scriptures for today and also during the week we have a few water stories. Today we have two stories and both are very strange. There is a sense of tension in both readings. The people, having left the slavery of Egypt are beginning to grumble. Why did you make us leave Egypt? Did you bring us into this desert to watch us die? They were getting worse and Moses is getting nervous. What is he going to do with them? What are they going to do to him? Are they going to startstoning him? Then we hear that Moses strike a rock and water comes forth. Then things settle down for a little bit.

Then we went to the Gospel and we have the wonderful story of the Samaritan Woman. It will be the first of a wonderful trilogy... the Samaritan Woman, the Man Born Blind and The Raising of Lazarus. Today we will linger with the Woman at the Well and look to see what we might learn about Sabbath.

This gospel passage is so familiar to us that often when the proclaimer of the gospel says “A woman of Samaria came to draw water” ... we say—“O yeah, I know this story and sometimes we tune out.” That is really dangerous because when the story is from the Gospel according to John we have to keep pealing back layer after layer after layer trying to plumb to the depths of the text. Whenever we hear the story it is for the first time because the Word is a Living Word.

There are so many strange things happening in this story and each one inviting us to come and ponder and question... to pull at and poke at the passages, ... to pick it up
and look under it and around it to see what the Word is for us. We have to let the Word walk around in us and we have to let ourselves walk around in the Word.

I have to confess that the last time we had the reading of the Woman at the Well I happened to be the preacher. I thought—that’s nice I will pull that preaching out; dust it off and I would be good to go. As if that would work!! Sometimes I shock myself with my own denseness --because I know when I say that or when I think that I am so, so far off the mark. It suggests that I merely have to pull it out from my file, dust it off and preach it again. If you want to make God laugh tell him your plans. Preaching doesn’t work that way ... the Word is a living Word and every time we proclaim it or hear it is the first time. I also have to keep reminding myself that I am not the preacher – merely an instrument through which the Word will be the preacher. The word God has for you today is new.

Since Tim invited me I have been praying with this reading and with this community in mind wondering how it could be woven into the idea of Sabbath. As I said, I have let the Word walk around in my heart for weeks. Going over it again and again; letting days go by when I didn’t give it a thought but it was still working in me.

Jesus is going from Galilee to Judea and chose to pass through Samaria—although a very dangerous way to go it was the most expedient because the trip could be made in three days. That they chose to go that way is not too strange but what is strange is that the disciples went to the village to get food. They left Jesus alone....by a well but with no bucket and no cup to get or drink the water. This was a very dangerous territory for any traveller but especially for a Jew and they left him alone without a bucket and without a cup. Our scriptures tell us, “Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well.”

Then the woman appears in the story. She is alone and that is very, very strange. Wells were very important ... just as our water sources are very important... which we all too well know after the disaster in West Virginia. This was Jacob’s Well and the water from this well was known for the coolness and sweetness of the water because the well was very, very deep. The women would go to the well in the early morning
while it was cool. They had a leather bucket that was used to draw the water up from the well. Then they would fill the water jug; place it on their head and take it back to their home. This would be repeated until they had enough water for the day. They would repeat this in the cool of the evening to collect the water that would take them through the night. It would have been very dangerous for a woman to be so far from the village by herself. Also it is noontime ... not the time for going to the well-- it would have been the hottest part of the day. I wonder why she is alone. Why didn’t she go with the other women? In John’s Gospel always pay attention to the time. One of John’s underlying themes is light and dark and he conveys it through time and also blindness and sight. This is noontime, the brightest part of the day. The woman is in the light.

The hatred between the Samaritans was deep and fierce and right away Jesus breaks through that. Jesus says, “Give me a drink.” Right away he pushes the racial, gender, religious and ethnic boundaries of his day. Jewish men did not speak to Jewish women in public so you can be sure that it was a taboo to speak to a Samaritan woman and an even bigger taboo to share a drinking cup. For a Jew to do that would mean that he was unclean and would not be able to enter the Temple until he had gone through the rites for purification. But it is hot and Jesus is thirsty. Jesus is tired and he is thirsty and the disciples left him alone without a bucket and without a cup to get the water.

Not the first time we have heard word like this – on the first Sunday when Jesus had been in the desert of wilderness for forty day and nights we heard that he “was tired and famished.” Not the last time we will hear words similar to this. From the cross we will hear Jesus say, “I thirst.”

This gospel has been haunting me ...Jesus is tired. Jesus is hungry. Jesus is thirsty but he has no bucket ... he has no cup.

I wondered what makes Jesus tired. What makes me or you tired? Jesus is tired from the journey ...tired from walking, yes -- but could he be tired because things were not going well. The disciples were not getting the message. He has taught them, showed
them, explained to them and they still don’t get it. ...and it has worn Jesus out. They went out to buy food not realizing the Bread of Life was in their midst. They make him tired. They left him alone with no bucket and no cup and he is thirsty. They don’t quench his thirst.

So we have a tired and thirsty Jesus. Again I sat with this gospel letting it roll around in my mind and heart...think about it – he has no bucket and he has no cup. He has no bucket to draw forth the water and he has no cup in which to pour the water.

One night I woke up out of a sound sleep and instantly heard I don’t need a bucket.

I am from Massachusetts. When the sun comes up one of the places that receives the first rays of the rising sun is Marblehead, the most eastern land point in the state. So if you are a bit dense but you finally get something you or others might say: “Light dawns on Marblehead.”

The light was beginning to dawn on my marble head. Of course, Jesus does not need a bucket to draw forth the water. Jesus is the water. It flows from him. But that cup... now that cup gave me lots of sleepless nights. He is tired and thirsty and he has no cup! He has no cup!

I began to wonder ... do I make Jesus tired. Do I make Jesus thirsty? I have heard his message. I have been instructed in the message. It has been explained to me but I still do not always get it. I go off to the village – to do all kinds of good and important things --and leave Jesus alone sitting at the well... tired and thirsty with no cup?

Yes! Yes! I do! I do that over and over again. Our second reading this morning told us that the Holy Spirit pours out love. Yet so often I think we have filled our lives, our hearts with so much other stuff that there is no breathing room for the Spirit – no space in our heart. Too often, we have gone off to our villages looking for food. Too often we leave Jesus tired and hungry with no cup. We are busy doing our thing ... our job, our social life… all good things. Sometimes we have filled our heart with things that are not good – resentment, anger, selfishness: we know what takes up too
much space in our heart – our cup. When we do that we, too, leave Jesus alone tired and thirsty without a cup.

Think about that Jesus is thirsty ... in John’s writing there is always layer upon layer of meaning. Jesus is probably thirsty physically ... he is tired and it is noontime – the heat of the day – so of course he is thirsty... but what else does Jesus thirst for?

If we look at the definition for thirsty we find: Feeling the need to drink but it also means having a craving for or great desire for. What can Jesus be craving? For what does Jesus have a great desire?

From the cross we will hear Jesus say, “I thirst.” Was it just for water ... maybe–but I don’t think so. I think Jesus has a deep thirst to do what Jesus was meant to do. I think Jesus has a deep thirst to pour out his love upon us. To pour out the life giving water of the spirit into us until it flows and flows and flows over us and not only fills us up but overflows. Jesus longs for that. He wants to fill us up. He thirsts for us... but he has no cup.

What will quench Jesus’ thirst ... what will ease his tiredness?

Maybe... maybe the Sabbath is not just for us. I have a friend and when I get too caught up she will say, “Get over yourself; it is not always about you.” That’s true – it isn’t always about us. Maybe Jesus needs the Sabbath because he is tired and thirsty. He is tired of us leaving him alone, sitting at the well with no cup. He is thirsty for us ... he greatly desires to spend time with us. **Maybe Jesus needs Sabbath time with us even more than we need the Sabbath time with him** –BUT — BUT he has no cup.

He doesn’t need a bucket but he needs the cup. You and I are invited to be the cup. You and I are invited to open ourselves up to let Jesus pour into us all the love he has for us. He needs us to be the cup that receives the life-giving water that he wants ... the life-giving water he greatly desires to fill us with... the life-giving water he craves to share with us. You and I are the cup that will be used to satisfy Jesus’ thirst. You and I will are the cup that Jesus will fill and will satisfy his thirst.
I think when we stop leaving Jesus sitting at the side of the well with no cup and we take the time to take the time to linger at the well; to let ourselves be the cup -- life giving water will fill us up and Jesus’ thirst will be quenched and our thirst will be satisfied.

When we gather here as a faith community we are honoring the Sabbath. It is wonderful and we need this but it doesn’t replace the time we need to be alone with Jesus. It doesn’t satisfy the thirst Jesus has for each of us.

What else is happening at this well? We have that wonderful line – “he told me everything I ever did.” What do you think Jesus told her? (— most likely you are thinking of her sins, those five husbands and the man she is currently living with—).

Now think about that for a minute. If Jesus sat with you and told you every single thing you have ever done that was wrong; told you every sin you had committed — pointed out all your faults — would that make you bubble up and overflow with joy? Would that make you want to linger at the well with Jesus? I don’t think so! If Deacon Tom came running into this church and said come meet this man I met. He will tell you every sin you have ever committed, tell you what’s wrong with you and point out all your faults. I would say, “Really! — I’ll get back to you on that.”

Jesus loved her – I think he told her how much he loved her; told her all the good she had done; revealed to her the goodness that is deep within her — did not define her by what she had done wrong. Her sin — our sin does not define her or us. She has been defined from all eternity. She is a beloved daughter of God and has always been loved by God. He helped her put her life in perspective — all because she lingered at the well and offered him her cup. Now that would make me bubble up with joy. That would make me want to tell you that and invite you to have that experience.

BUT — he needs a cup — he needs you to sit and linger by the well and be the cup he needs ... he needs you to take Sabbath time to quench his thirst. Jesus thirsts to touch the places of hurt in our heart with the healing waters of his love, the places of darkness and confusion; the places where we doubt and wonder what it is all about; the places that need to be touched with forgiveness.; the places that are clinging to
hope in a world that sometimes seems to have gone mad. Lingering at the well with Jesus spending Sabbath time with him helps put our lives in perspective.

In our gospel today I believe Jesus says to us what he said to the Samaritan Woman, “Give me a drink.” We are called to quench Jesus’ thirst. He craves to pour life-giving water into us BUT! BUT! We have to be the cup that receives that life-giving water. We have to linger with him at the well; we have to give Jesus Sabbath time not to quench our thirst for him but to quench Jesus’ thirst.

Jesus always turns things upside down. So when we do this ... when we come to the well. When we linger at the well and not go off to our village leaving Jesus alone with no cup to satisfy his thirst, I believe that we will find that the life-giving water not only quenches Jesus’ thirst but it fills us up and not only fills us up but it starts to overflow.

It will overflow and overflow and overflow and be an endless fountain springing up within us and it will flow out of us .... as individuals, yes, … but also as a faith community. When we come to the well as a faith community to spend Sabbath time with Jesus, the life-giving water we receive will overflow and through us touch the places of violence in our world, the places of injustice, the places of hate. It will touch them with the life giving water of God’s peace and God’s love.

When we let ourselves be filled to overflowing to the point of proclaiming ... to the point of being disciples with Sabbath strength, then Jesus’ thirst will be quenched.

When we, time after time, linger at the well and be the cup that Jesus will use to satisfy his thirst then gradually we, too, will begin to thirst with the thirst of Jesus. We will begin to thirst and that thirst will only be quenched when we begin to let his endless spirit touch others through us then Jesus thirst will be satisfied his tiredness eased.

Look at Sabbath not from your need only – for indeed we certainly do need the Sabbath but also look at Sabbath from Jesus’ need. Today he says to us. “Give me a
drink.” Hear that not as a command, hear it as a plea. Jesus is asking you for a drink.

He is tired.

He is thirsty.

He has no bucket but doesn’t need one.

He has no cup and he absolutely, positively needs a cup.

He needs you to be the cup. He needs me to be the cup.

We need to linger at the well with Jesus over and over and over again and continually let Jesus pour forth that life-giving water.

Notice, the Samaritan woman got this and when she did she immediately went to tell the others. She left her watering jug at the well because now the life-giving water was within her. She is our Sabbath example of an overflowing cup. She is an example of a Sabbath filled disciple.

Recall the question that ended the reading from Exodus today, “Is the LORD in our midst or not?” Yes, the Lord is in our midst but all too often we have gone off to our villages and have left him sitting by the well with no cup. We really have to stop doing that.

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