

### Stages of Thirst, Stages of Faith

Thirst is real, and it's important to pay attention to it.

On our first full day at Disney World down at Orlando, Florida (which happened to be one week ago today) the weather was hot and sunny. When the buses dropped us off at the "Magical Kingdom" theme park we were reminded to drink lots of water. Apparently, it's so easy to get distracted by all the sights and sounds in the Magical Kingdom (including Mickey and Minnie and all kinds of princesses) that you can become gradually dehydrated without knowing it.

As you might imagine, in a place like Disney there are all kinds of options for things to drink. Including, of course, all kinds of sweet soda drinks. (In fact, there was even one place where you could sample soft drinks from all around the world! For free! Yippee!) But if it was water you wanted, you either had to buy it in bottles, or remember to lug around your own.

Okay, so Lois and I wanted to be good grandparents. We bought water bottles and reminded Rosie to drink regularly. (Neil didn't need to since he's still on breast milk.) At one point Rosie even protested, "Papa, I'm drinking lots of hydrate!" (I couldn't help but laugh, but she didn't get the joke!)

At some point, mostly for fun, I decided to Google "stages of thirst," and I was taken to a website with the caption "This is what happens to your body as you die of dehydration." Yikes! "Water makes up about 55-65 percent of your body," the website began. "It's a crucial ingredient in the chemistry that helps your brain think, your blood flow, and your muscles move. What happens after you sweat through a spin class, spend a day at the beach, or simply ignore your thirst?" (The website didn't include spending a day at Disney World, but it should have!) The site went on to identify four stages of thirst. **Stage 1** it simply calls "thirst." This stage begins when you've lost around two percent of your body weight in water. It says, "When thirst kicks in, your body clings to all remaining moisture. Your kidneys send less water to your bladder. As you sweat less, your body temperature rises. Your blood becomes thicker and sluggish. To maintain oxygen levels, your heart rate increases." (Anybody feeling thirsty this morning? 😊)

**Stage 2** it ominously calls "Fainting." This begins when you've lost four percent of your body weight in water. "Your blood is so concentrated that the resulting decrease in blood flow makes your skin shrivel. Your blood pressure drops, making you prone to fainting. You've basically stopped sweating, and without this coolant, you start to overheat." (Sounds like an old car on the verge of breaking down!) And indeed, **Stage 3** the website identifies with the words "Organ Damage." This begins when you've lost seven percent of your body weight in water. "Your body is having trouble maintaining blood pressure. To survive, it slows blood flow to nonvital organs, such as your kidneys, causing damage. Without your kidneys filtering your blood, cellular waste quickly builds up. You're literally dying for a glass of water." No surprise that **Stage 4** the website succinctly calls "Death." (This becomes a concern when you've lost ten percent of your body weight in water, which is like going for five days, or running for 11 hours in 90-degree weather, without rehydrating (or as Rosie would say, without drinking enough

“hydrate”). Your vital organs risk overheating. If kidney failure doesn’t kill you, liver failure will.” Like I said, thirst is real, and it’s important to pay attention to it.

So when Jesus asked that woman outside the city of Sychar for a drink, was he really thirsty? [*A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”*] Or was something else going on? In the gospel of John, it’s often hard to tell, especially at first. But why wouldn’t he be thirsty? He was human, wasn’t he? And it was the hottest part of the day. [*“It was about noon.”*]

But there was something strange about this encounter. For starters, Sychar was in Samaria, making this woman a “Samaritan.” And Jewish men like Jesus didn’t typically talk to Samaritan women. Which she rather boldly pointed out. [*“How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)*”] To which he boldly replied, *“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.”*

You may remember that in my sermon two weeks ago I talked about all the double meanings in the Gospel of John. We’ve got a couple of them right here, and the woman at the well wasn’t tracking at first. First of all, there are different kinds of thirst. And, there are different kinds of “water.” All the woman knew is that Jacob’s well was right there. And it had been hydrating her people for centuries. Was this rather presumptuous Jewish man greater than Jacob? Who after all was their common ancestor?

One of the things I most enjoyed about being at Disney is that there are people from all over the world. Having all different skin colors. Speaking all different languages. And it became quickly obvious to me that even though we might not be able to understand one another, we all, you might say, have a common ancestor. And, we all get thirsty.

Disney World is variously known as “The Most Magical Place on Earth” or even “The Happiest Place on Earth.” And people come there from all over the world seeking that magic, that happiness. Families come with young children. Grandparents come with their grandchildren. High school students on spring break sometimes come with their school orchestras (like Madeline’s and Eric’s orchestras did). And every single person who comes there can’t help but get huge smiles on their faces (okay, I admit it, our faces ☺) when we see Mickey and Minnie Mouse walking around, with their huge, painted-on smiles. And when we see “princesses” named Elsa and Moana and Cinderella and Snow White walking around, we can’t help but hope that maybe they really are real. That maybe there truly is magic in the world.

But what is it that we are really thirsty for? That is the question this text from the Gospel of John is asking us all. What is it, without which, our most vital organs will eventually shut down and we will die?

Jesus calls that something “living water.” And, he claims to offer it. Yes, even to this doubly outcast Samaritan woman who just happened to come to Jacob’s well to fetch her daily water, so she and her family might quench their daily human thirst, while this Jewish man was sitting there. And what is this “living water” anyway?

To her rather astonishing credit, the woman seems open to finding out. Granted, she doesn’t grasp it all at once. It’s more like she grasps it in stages. “Stages of faith,” we might call them (and which I wrote about in this past week’s e-newsletter.)

There is just something about this man. Something intriguing. Something about his boldness. About the way he seemed to know everything about her. Every dirty detail, we might

even say. And he reached out to her anyway. He asked her for a drink, and in doing so, crossed the most entrenched of social boundaries. At the very least, the woman figured, he is surely a prophet of some kind. But might he even be something more?

And here's the curious thing. His own self-professed disciples seemed clueless at this point. Or at best are even slower to understand just who he is. While meanwhile this foreigner leaves her water jar at Jacob's Well and veritably runs back to her village. And she blurts out to her people, "*Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?*" The way she asks that question belies both her crusty incredulity and seems to reveal her genuine hope. Such that her fellow Samaritans cannot help but want to know more about him (or as John the gospel writer puts it, "*[they] believed in him because of the woman's testimony*"). And they leave whatever it was they were doing, and they go back with that woman, to "come and see" for themselves (to use one of the most magical of the Gospel of John's phrases). And having "come and seen," John says "*they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They further said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.'*" (Talk about quickly advancing in ones' stages of faith!)

"Savior of the world." When it comes down to it, isn't that what we're all looking for? Isn't Jesus, whom these foreigners now recognize as the Savior of the world, the One we're all ultimately thirsty for? The "Living Water" that will bubble up inside us like a fountain? The happiest and most magical place on earth that Walt Disney thought he could create simply by building a handful of theme parks, to which he rightly guessed people from all over the world would come? Bringing their children, and yes, their grandchildren, and their high school orchestra students?

While meanwhile, amidst the smiling cartoon characters and princesses, Jesus so boldly declares "I am he." Or simply, "I am." And then when we finally do come to him, when we finally "come and see" for ourselves, our very Creator and Messiah and Savior welcomes us. All of us. Because there are no outsiders.

We are all thirsty. And it's important to pay attention to that thirst. It's important to drink the hydrate that truly quenches our thirst, that keeps that most vital of organs, namely our soul, from finally but so avoidably dying.

May we be like that Samaritan woman and her fellow Samaritan people. May we earnestly seek the Messiah. May we be open and ready to go find him in the most unexpected of places. May we accept the gift of Living Water he offers. May he keep nudging us to grow, as we surely, even if often slowly, move from one stage of faith to the next.

Amen.