

*Frederick A. Niedner, Jr.*

SERMON AT THE HOLY COMMUNION

I.N.I.

I have been told that when you are dying of thirst, you crave salt--not water, but salt. Your last efforts are spent seeking desperately that very thing which will hasten your end. So it is, I fear, with all of our terrible thirsts. The alcoholic, sick and frightened to death of his thirst, finds a temporary peace only in one more day and one more night of stupor. The adulterer, so very ashamed and so strangely alone, finds a momentary solace only in the forgetfulness of just one more forbidden embrace.

So it was with the thirsty Samaritan woman who conversed with Jesus at the well in our gospel reading (John 4). The *torah* allowed only three marriages, but she had been through five husbands and at least one roommate in her search for the life which she craved. And even then she was not satisfied. John makes it a point to tell us that it was noon when she spoke with Jesus at the well. Modest women did not go to the well at noon, but early in the morning or in the evening. Only women who were on the make frequented the wells at midday. What this woman hoped to get at the well you couldn't take home in a

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*The sermon is based on the readings at the Holy Communion: Ezekiel 36:24-28, Ephesians 2:1-9 and Saint John 4:1-30.*

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bucket. What do you expect from a Samaritan woman anyway? Everyone knew how they were. An extant first-century Jewish source suggests that all Samaritan women must be considered unclean, as they were said to have started menstruating already in their cradles.

Now this woman has come to Jacob's well for something which will quench her thirst. In John's highly symbolic manner of narrative, that water from Jacob's well refers to that which Israel has which creates and sustains its special life, namely, its election and its *torah*. Jesus' comments, however, suggest that even though you drink from that well, you will still go away thirsty.

Why? Ezekiel offers a clue. The Old Testament Lesson from Ezekiel 36 also speaks of an unclean woman, an unfaithful bride. This one was Yahweh's own bride, Israel, his beloved, his elect. She had not trusted Yahweh, her husband, for her life, and she had made alliances with other nations and their gods. That, said the whole parade of prophets, was like sleeping around.

Now Israel sat in exile, unclean and scattered among the nations. What did it mean to be so "unclean"? According to Ezekiel, they had ruined the family name. They had profaned it. Because Yahweh had judged his beloved and had thrown her out of the house, everywhere she went people said of her, "These are the people of Yahweh, and yet they had to go out of his land." And that made Yahweh look common and ordinary. It was his name, his reputation, which was at stake. His unique reputation was as a God whose ultimate response to human sin and evil was not merely punishment, curse, floods, and death, but mercy and compassion. He had gotten involved with a people and tied his reputation to theirs so that through them he might bring blessing instead of curse to all the families

of the earth. But now Yahweh had been made to look common and ordinary, a vengeful judge like all other gods. And his own people sat giving off the odors of uncleanness and did not work for the blessing of anyone. Their hearts were turned to stone and scarcely beat for themselves, much less for the love of anyone else.

What about our own hearts, and what about the terrible thirst which have driven us into uncleanness and adultery? We are the people entrusted with God's mission of blessing the peoples of the earth. We are the people with the clerical collars. That is supposed to be a sign of a couple of things concerning us. For one, it is assumed that you own a bucket with which to draw that which can really sustain life and quench those terrible thirsts which threaten it. For another, it means that your black shirt is supposed to be filled with a real, live, flesh heart which beats for others with the compassion of God himself.

Families come to you for a drink. If only they could see your own bucket and how dry it is as you set it at your own table! It has been said of the Jews that "they are like everybody else, only more so." The same might be said of us who are the second generation children of Abraham, us who are entrusted also with that mission of blessing. At least we think of ourselves that way. Our problems seem magnified to us because of our work. Everyone outside in the parish probably thinks that life at the pastor's house is like life among the Waltons. But you know the truth. It is more like a bad soap opera which we might call "As the Bucket Drains," and the thirst remains. Our daughters get pregnant like everyone else's, only more so, it seems to us. Our sons leave home in bitterness and rebel against us just like everyone else's, only more so, it seems to us. And, as is becoming increasingly

obvious to the world, our marriages are subject to the same pressures, agonies, emptiness, loneliness, and heartbreak as anyone's. That, too, seems "more so," because of the effect it so often has upon our parish families, the ones who come to us for strength. And yet, we must continue to pour out of our dry buckets for everyone else.

The waters are failing. Our hearts are too tired from the thirst for appreciation which never seems to come, from the secrets which we have carried around within us for too long now, from trying so awfully hard to be ambitious without appearing so, or simply from sheer exhaustion.

Perhaps even worse, in our cases, is the fact that the forms and symptoms of our thirst and emptiness are disguised as forms of sacrifice and mission. Our spouses and children, our hearts and our livers are sacrificed to the busy-ness and the pressures of one who "is going about the Lord's work" day and night. And the judgment which inevitably comes upon our lives for that incessant working "for the Lord" in the form of family and health problems makes Yahweh's name profane. "These are the people of Yahweh, and yet they had to go out of his land."

Ezekiel and John offer a solution. For both it is a solution of water and the Spirit which is offered to the thirsty and the unclean, the living dead. Ezekiel says that for the sake of his holy name, his unique reputation as a God of mercy and love, he will rescue, clean, and once more put his Spirit, his life, his very own beating heart, into that people. He still wishes to have his name tied to ours! And every time we pray our Lord's prayer

we are praying for that saving event. Once and for all, we ask, may the holiness of that Name be done among us.

That is an awesome thing for which to pray. It is to pray for a new heart for this work and mission of ours. We are asking that our stone hearts be replaced with flesh hearts. That, of course, does not happen by quick, easy, and sterile surgery. I'm not exactly certain how it happens, but I think what God does is pound and beat upon our hearts until they ache just as his does over his lost loved ones, the old, the sick, the dying, the thirsty, the members of our own families for whom our hearts must learn to beat again.

I say that because I have seen that such a heart and Spirit is given only to and through the crucified one, the one who spoke with the thirsty Samaritan woman at the well. He took our life upon himself and he, too, when he was lifted up on the cross, cried out, "I thirst!" His body was broken, and his heart was crushed.

And we in our baptism have died with him. We have drunk in our baptism of the one Spirit, the Spirit which makes us one in the body of Christ. It is the body broken, but it is also the body resurrected. We have drunk of living water and are born again of water and of the Spirit. The dead with Christ in baptism are raised with him.

It is into those baptized ones that he blows that new Spirit. By that Spirit we forgive sins in this body. We do not use our sins, our thirsts, our weaknesses against one another. The Spirit of God's own heart, the Spirit of the crucified and forgiving one

lives within us. It is a life which overflows and is infectious. It has a way of spreading in our homes, our parishes, our cities. It is the water of life for a thirsty world which flows from this body.

Put that in your bucket, and you will never die of thirst. Come, let us drink again of that Spirit and in his meal eat of the one body which gives us life, and let our hearts beat anew.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.