

April 13, 2008  
John 4:1-26

Jackson, MI

## FROM WHICH WELL ARE YOU DRINKING?

*THE SECOND SERMON IN THE "ARE YOU THIRSTY?" SERIES FROM JOHN 4:1-26*

It seems to me that we are obsessed with the idea of getting full. We desperately want to be filled to the brim. I know this isn't a revelation to any of us, but the reality of this obsession was driven home for me recently by a fast food commercial.

I wanted to show you the fast food commercial this morning but could not find it anywhere on the Internet, so you'll just have to use your imagination as I describe it to you. More than likely, some of you have seen it and will be able to recall the images that are associated with it.

The ad campaign I want to talk about is for Burger King's Chicken Tendercrisp sandwich. When the commercial begins, you see two construction workers laboring side by side with a loud noise in the background that seems to get progressively louder. We are led to believe that the sound is coming from a cement mixer that is also in the picture, but when the cement mixer is turned off, the noise is still there. That's when one of the men realizes that the sound is actually coming from his stomach and, in embarrassment and exasperation, he slaps his belly and tells his growling stomach to "Shut up!"

Has anybody else seen that commercial? Actually, the end of the commercial is a little more humorous when the growling stomach noises come from a petite woman who is supposedly the worksite supervisor. She is standing in the midst of a number of big working guys. She too yells "Shut up!" to her stomach.

That whole growling stomach thing can be pretty embarrassing. My own stomach likes to "sound off" at the most inconvenient of times, like during group prayer or when I'm meeting someone for the first time. And I too am tempted to yell at my stomach on those occasions.

The message of the Burger King commercial is that we can avoid embarrassing situations like the ones in the commercial if we are properly full, and the way for us to get properly full-of course-is by eating a Burger King sandwich, the Chicken Tendercrisp. In order to visually communicate this, the commercial shows the two construction workers side by side again, this time with cartoon drawings of their stomachs. One man's stomach contains the competitor's chicken sandwich which is woefully small and bounces around the man's stomach like a little rubber ball. The other's, however, is full; a Chicken Tendercrisp sandwich is wedged so tightly into the space that you wonder how he was able to get it in there-all in one piece I might add-in the first place.

But Burger King isn't worried about how you get the sandwich into your stomach; their point is that, when you eat their Tendercrisp sandwich, you will be full. Problem solved, at least until you need another Burger King product.

Well, maybe... The amount that Chicken Tendercrisp will help us depends on why we're eating.

Now that might sound a bit silly, but it's true. If I think about my own life I know that there are

times I eat when I want to fill my stomach, but there are other times I eat when it really has nothing to do with my stomach. Sometimes I eat because I want to fill time. I find that when I am waiting at the airport for the hour or so that they now force us to be there ahead of our flight, I am tempted to eat. Sometimes I eat because I want to fill up my empty hands. When I am sitting in front of the television watching a movie, it is almost reflexive for me to want to have something to eat while I'm watching. Sometimes I eat because I want to fill up my esteem. When I am feeling emotionally hurt or depressed, sometimes I will reach for something to eat because being physically full can make me think I feel better.

The problem is that food doesn't really solve any of those issues. It helps when you are physically hungry and the body is running low on fuel, but when I'm bored or I'm down... not so much.

Interestingly enough, the Samaritan woman has a similar issue. When she comes to the well where Jesus waits, she is spiritually thirsty but is using the wrong things to quench her thirst.

Jesus knows this, so when he speaks with her, he uses the metaphor of "living water." Look at v. 10: Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." This seems to confuse the Samaritan woman, so Jesus attempts to clarify things for her in v. 13-14: Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The Samaritan woman only seems more confused, so Jesus throws subtlety to the wind and confronts her in vv. 16-18: He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." 17 "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. 18 The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

Hmmm... I wonder what the woman was trying to use to fill her spiritual emptiness. Now the text doesn't explicitly tell us, and we need to be careful when we read between the lines in Scripture, but she had been married five times and was up to man number six. The first five marriages had not seemed to work for her, but this woman isn't a quitter. She doesn't give up on trying to fill her void, so she follows the definition of insanity: she does the same thing hoping for a new result. She initiates a new relationship with another man.

Now, before we belittle the Samaritan woman, we need to take a hard look in the mirror. We're not all that different from her, are we? We have the same tendency to try to stick square pegs into round holes, don't we? And food and relationships aren't the only things we chase after in an attempt to fill up our emptiness. I made a list of the things we pursue in the hopes of "filling" ourselves and it's a bit daunting. See if there are any here that you have found yourself chasing after. In addition to food and personal relationships, there's work, physical intimacy, possessions, money, power, hobbies, accomplishments, accolades, approval, fame, position, knowledge, physical attractiveness, technical proficiency, competition, "extreme" living, denial of self... This is just what I came up with in about five minutes. I have no idea what kind of list I might have been able to assemble if I had taken a couple of hours to really mull this one over.

I don't suppose any of these look familiar, do they? These things-and others that I didn't think of in those five minutes-are what we chase and chase, hoping that if we can just get enough of them

we will finally be filled. Finally we will have purpose and meaning. Finally we will be appreciated and loved. But finally never comes does it? There's always something or someone new or better. And what we once thought would complete us now needs to be replaced or added to. What we accomplish, what we buy, what we consume never seems to cut it, does it? Oh sure, that Chicken Tendercrisp or that new relationship can sometimes take the edge off the need. But none of them ever truly satisfies that spiritual thirst that we all feel that gnaws at us and won't leave us alone.

Why? Because a spiritual thirst requires a spiritual thirst quencher.

When Jesus points out to the Samaritan woman that he knows she's been in several committed relationships, he's essentially asking her, "So you're on man number six. How's that working out for you?" Jesus' words remind me of an old after shave commercial, where putting on the after shave was compared to being slapped in the face. Anybody remember that one? And after he was slapped, the man smiled and said, "Thanks, I needed that." Jesus words gave this woman the wake-up call she needed to see things more clearly. Her strategy of filling her spiritual need with another personal relationship wasn't working. In fact, it was failing miserably. However she arrived at marriage number five, she was clearly stepping outside proper boundaries, and her desperation had led her to living in adultery and as an outcast in her own village. And that spiritual thirst was still gnawing at her...

The thought occurred to me that we too might need a spiritual slap-in-the-face wake-up call ourselves. We do the same things, don't we? Some of us chase possessions, and we need to wake up and see that we have a great big pile of "next best things" and nothing to show for it. We're still spiritually empty. Some of us chase power, and we need to wake up and see that we've lost friendships and respect as we've used people as stepping stones and ladder rungs. And we're still spiritually empty. Some of us chase addictions, and we need to wake up and see that we are wasting our money and endangering our lives for a fleeting feeling. And we're still spiritually empty. How're things working out for us using these and other things to fill our spiritual emptiness? They don't work, do they? And we're often left standing in the middle of a mess that we made trying to make them work.

We have a spiritual thirst which requires a spiritual thirst quencher, and none of those things we had on the big list fits the bill.

But that's not all Jesus tells us. When Jesus gives the Samaritan woman her reality check, she finally turns her conversation toward the spiritual. In vv. 19-20, she begins to speak to Jesus about the differences between the Samaritan faith and the Jewish faith. As we learned last week, there was a long-running conflict between the Samaritans and Jews, and part of that conflict was about where the "right" place to worship was located. The Samaritan woman seems to be leading Jesus right back into that old debate.

But Jesus doesn't bite. In fact, he stops her in her tracks. Look again at what he says in vv. 21-24: Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. 24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

I'm not sure, but I think Jesus forgot to pick up a copy of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. "You Samaritans worship what you do not know..." is not a compliment. It would be like saying "The Samaritan religion is ignorant." Actually, it wouldn't be like saying it; Jesus essentially is saying it. But Jesus isn't calling her intelligence into question, he's simply trying to keep her from making a bad situation worse. She's already wasted a great deal of time trying to fill the spiritual void in her life with relationships, he doesn't want her to waste any more trying to follow a false religion. Though it is probably natural for her to turn to the religious system with which she was raised, Jesus lets her know that the Samaritan way will not lead her to God.

Now you might think this is leading us to a discussion of what other world religions lack when compared to Christianity. Friends, let me reinforce for you what Jesus, himself, said: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me." It is only through faith in Jesus that a person can enter into relationship with God. Period.

But I'm not so worried about that with you this morning. For some odd reason, I just can't see many of you being tossed between Christianity and some other faith. My fear is that you-and I-will fail to fully engage the one we say we claim. I fear that we will become content with doing something spiritual or related to the spiritual-like calling ourselves Christians or Evangelicals, or just showing up to a service every once in a while, or finding a little niche to serve in-without truly connecting with Jesus. Those things-identifying ourselves with Jesus, participating in worship, and serving in the church and community-are supposed to come from the overflow of our relationship with Jesus.

I've seen what happens when people in the church settle for something "Christianly" spiritual, if "Christianly" is even a word, instead of Jesus. Things go okay for a while, but then the person begins to have issues because there still that spiritual emptiness gnawing at him or her. They might try a little harder at their "Christianly" spiritual endeavor, but eventually they get upset because it isn't working, and then they start complaining about the church, because the church isn't doing what it's supposed to be doing. But friends, the Church isn't meant to be the answer to our spiritual emptiness, we become the Church when we are filled with the love and forgiveness of Jesus.

Don't settle for anything less than Jesus to quench your spiritual thirst. Nothing else is going to satisfy you. Even the Samaritan woman seems to understand that it's going to take the Messiah to truly set her right. And Jesus is right there to say to her, and to us: "I who speak to you am he." Don't settle for anything less than Jesus.