

Content or Form?
Sermon for Pentecost Monday
Sermon Text: John 4:19-26



The woman said to Him, “Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet.”²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but You say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.”²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.”²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship Him.²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”²⁵ The woman said to Him, “I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ). When He comes, He will tell us all things.”²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am He.”

In the story, ‘Lawrence of Arabia,’ a British officer had invited Arab men to Paris as guests. He proudly showed his guests around Paris – the Louvre, the Champs Elysee, and much more. But his guests were interested in only one thing. They were interested in the water faucets in the hotel which brought running water. The guests were eager to bring these faucets with running water home with them. They finally convinced the hotel to unscrew the faucets and export them to the desert. They were certainly very disappointed when the faucets in the desert brought forth nothing but hot Arabian desert air because it wasn’t the faucet but the pipes that supplied water to the faucets. The content was important, not the faucet itself. In Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman, a similar misunderstanding comes up. First, the Samaritan woman went to the well in the heat of midday to bring water back to her home. She gets into a discussion with Jesus about content and form. They talk about earthly water and about living water. Initially, the conversation revolves around appearances. It was about the right place to worship – the Samaritans worshiped on Mount Gerizim and the Jews worshiped in Jerusalem. Apparently, the Samaritan woman wanted to involve Jesus in a theological discussion. But at the same time, she tried to hide her misery and loneliness from Jesus. People have been trying shield ourselves from God’s influence for years by using how we conduct our religion. There are many people who actually associate prayer with external things: such as sayings and even religious clothing. For example, for Muslims, it is essential to say a specific prayer in the direction of Mecca. The physical posture and form are also extremely important. What goes on inside the person while they pray is less important. Jesus introduced a different way to worship. Prayer is done in spirit and truth and is nothing less than an encounter of the sinner before God. Jesus Himself is in essence on a mission precisely to restore this encounter of the sinner with God because He wants to quench our true thirst. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus would restore the encounter with God and this encounter has very practical meaning that will change lives. We look at this Samaritan woman and see how she got from a superficial discussion about the right place to worship to a discussion about worshiping in spirit and truth. The story of the Samaritan woman is a modern story. It’s a story about broken relationships. The Samaritan woman has a terrible life story. While speaking with Jesus, we find out that she was married five times and has lost her husband five times: through divorce, death? We don’t find out. In any case, you can say that she made a new beginning five times. She hoped and wished to finally find security and love. She finally finds someone who understands her and then the same thing happens again and again – disappointments and hurts – and then the relationship dries up like the hard Israelite soil, it withers, and then it dies. It is a modern story that is brought before us here. We all know it. Whether we are single or married or maybe even have been married multiple times – no matter what relationship we are in – people experience the same thing again and again. In the beginning, love seems so great that not even death can overpower it. In the beginning, the differences are attractive. But then the sun of everyday life comes and dries everything up. No matter how love is praised and valued, it simply doesn’t offer what it promises. Disappointments come, anger comes, and then deep hurt so that there is nothing left to do but to flee. People can’t stand broken relationships. Our world collapses and we have to escape. One person escapes into their work – with all his might, he wants to create something in his work that is missing in his relationship. The other escapes into addiction. But the more you do these things, the thirstier you become. When we want to fill the broken relationship

with a substitute love, we pound the hard dry earth together until it becomes as hard as stone. Our hearts will eventually become just like a hard stone which becomes like a fiery oven at noon in Israel – absolutely impervious. It's done and you can't get any further. The things that we do to get love back are like juice that you drink on a hot day. The more you drink of it, the thirstier you become. In the end, something must break. It can't go on like this. The woman in Samaria had 5 husbands and the one she had then was not her husband either. So now she couldn't even dare to go out in public. What a difficult mess!

The conversation with Jesus took place on two different levels. First, it's about what's on the outside. It's about drinking water on a hot day and it's about the right place to worship. Jesus breaks through this parallel world and breaks through the façade that the woman had established. He gets to the heart of the matter by promising the woman living water. That would be nice, the woman thinks, if there were such a water that would quench one's thirst so that they were never thirsty again. As we listen to this second conversation between Jesus and the woman, we realize: there isn't anything like this kind of water, that can't be what Jesus means, a water that fills you up for eternity must be something completely different. **"Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."** (John 4:13b-14)

In the end, the Giver of Life and the receiver, Christ and Christians, flow together here. Water is the connection between the Giver of all Life and people. A living current is possible from God to us and again back to God. This current simply takes us with it and carries us, even when we can no longer bear it. Jesus explains all of this to the woman at the well. But He does even more. He speaks directly to her in her distress. Jesus doesn't ask about guilt or cause, He breaks the packed earth of her heart only by saying: I know your story, I know about your futile longing and searching, about your very special, excruciating thirst! And then her astonished answer: "You, a stranger, know about this? 'You are a prophet!'" But the conversation continues. Jesus explains to the woman where He got His knowledge from, He explains to her where she can reach God in her distress, where she can worship Him and cry out to Him in her deep distress. Before, there were the places in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim in Samaria to worship, now people can call upon Him from anywhere "in spirit and in truth." "Yes, we are waiting for one who will show us all of this," says the woman wistfully. And then comes Jesus' great revelation: "I who speak to you am He." And with that, the conversation is over, the woman has heard enough and has nothing more to say to Him at the moment. She runs back to the village, her thirst is completely forgotten. She calls to the people: "Come and see!" And people come to Jesus. They ask Him to stay and He remains – they listen to Him and they pray. They no longer talk past each other, they talk with God.

Today on Pentecost Monday, we are talking about the activity of the Holy Spirit. And I often notice that in some places, we too have entrenched ourselves in outward appearances and imprisoned ourselves. We argue about this or that but have forgotten what it's all really about. It's actually about the fact that we are all like this Samaritan woman. In fact, the point is that we have all turned away from God and stopped praying. In silence, we wonder about ourselves and ask how it could happen that the outward form of worship doesn't reach the heart. To overcome these two worlds, we should look to Jesus. In this story of the Samaritan woman, the most remarkable thing is this: Jesus, the Son of God, is sitting there in need of a bucket with rope. Although He has authority over heaven and earth, He now needs something quite normal. Jesus certainly could command angels to bring Him water to quench His thirst. He doesn't do that because as Philippians 2 says: "He didn't count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant...and being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." So He also emptied Himself in such a way that He had to wait for a bucket of water, meanwhile, He allows this conversation to happen with a troubled woman. And what is there at the end of the conversation is an empty water bucket and an entire city bubbling with excitement about Jesus. The dry earth of hardened hearts has been broken through! The walls of the broken relationships have fallen to the ground in a single blow. People can breathe a sigh of relief. They can come before God with their living thirst. They can drink, not just a sip or from a cup now and then, but from a bubbling spring that gushes from here and now, from your house and my house, and into eternity. This bubbling spring is what I want. The spring is here. It is Jesus, the God who humbles Himself for us. He is still here, inviting us. Whoever finds Him will never thirst again. **"Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."** Amen.