

“Give Me a Drink”
Bishop’s Report to the Synod Assembly
Based on John 4:1-42

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By Bishop Wayne Miller

Report begins with a re-telling of the story of the Woman at the Well...

As you might imagine, there are layers of interpretation that have been built upon this old story. Like the entire landscape of Israel and Palestine... like the city of Nablus in the West Bank where Jacob’s Well is actually located... there is not a single good story that has not provided the site upon which at least two or three churches or mosques or some other human edifices have been constructed and fallen down again through the centuries.

But for me it is still most powerful at its most elemental level, which is that of a story. It is the story of a human encounter between a man and a woman... between a Jew and a Samaritan... between a seeker and a teacher... a story of an encounter between two stories. And through this simple encounter between stories, new life bubbled up to the surface and countless thousands, beginning with the woman herself and then with those first citizens of Nablus... countless thousands have found life and salvation.

So the question for us here today is, “How might this encounter from a time long ago and a place far away open us to the new refreshment and new life that we seek as we pause together in the middle of the day and in the middle of our work together as a Church?”

SLIDE #2

So I invite you now to turn to someone near you for just a few minutes and to share with this other person one thing that you think your congregation would be seeking or hoping for right now as you bring your jar to the well. What do you most need from the man sitting on the rim of the well?

Even though the specifics you shared just now will vary, the story suggests that There are at least a few things that you might all expect to hear in response to whatever it is that you came seeking...

SLIDE #3

1. You might hear Jesus ask YOU for a drink!

It is hard for me to imagine the shocking impact on this woman’s ears of hearing this esteemed Jewish man suggest the possibility that she had something valuable to give. It is hard to imagine the impact of hearing the possibility that the answer was not to be found in chasing after something she lacked, but in the sharing of something she already had.

So now the same question comes to you: Do you really believe passionately that you have something life-saving to give? Sometimes I feel that our conversation about faith has become so polite, so apologetic, so distant, so lacking in urgency. Does the salvation of the world still depend upon the gift you carry within you... or is this faith of ours just a social amenity, a lifestyle enhancement, a way to advance painlessly from good to great?

And with this question Jesus also offers the insight is that he does not bail people out. Jesus calls people out by calling them up. “Take up your cross.” “Your faith has made you well.” “Go and do likewise.” “Show yourself to authorities.” “Go and sin no more.” “Give me a drink.” So, tell me truthfully now, when your congregation council is locked in debate about what to do next... or when you are praying your personal prayer in those quiet hours before dawn, for what do you pray? Are you hoping that Jesus will bail you out or ask you for a drink?

SLIDE #4

2. You might find Jesus more interested in “who” than in “what.”

Rebirth springs from a relationship rather than activities, or ideas or things. When the woman starts to take the conversation into the literal implausibility of drawing water from a deep well without a bucket, Jesus gently reminds her that it is not about the size and shape of the bucket; it is about what is going on here between us.

SLIDE #5

When she tries to take the conversation to “this mountain or that mountain” he reminds her that it is not about location or buildings or worship styles; it is about a relationship with the Spirit of truth. Though the woman is impressed with his ability to tell her WHAT she had done, he calls her back to the importance of WHO she is talking to.

And yet... we still seem to think that effective mission is built on “what” questions: “What kind of worship do you do? What kind of youth group do you have? What is your position on this issue or that one? What sort of programs do you offer?” It so rarely seems to occur to us that “who will be there” may be more important than “what they do there,” or that “who is asking” may be more important than either the question or the answer.

- 3. You might find that Jesus is relentlessly calling your relationship from the high of a momentary encounter to the enduring life of a covenant.**

SLIDE #6

The fulfillment of individual life is found in relationship and the fulfillment of relationship resides in covenant... that is, a faithful continuing relationship built upon promises made, promises kept, promises honored... a relationship built upon the inseparability of promise and claim.

So now I invite you to turn to your conversation partner again and identify the promise that Jesus makes to this woman... and the claim upon her that completes the covenant between them...

Although you may have come up with several ways of saying it, the essential promise of the covenant is Jesus' promise that the source of replenishment, renewal, life, and hope is inexhaustible. The claim is that you don't get to keep the water in your own private bucket.

Once you recognize the value of the treasure you receive, the first thing you have to do is to pour it back out on the ground... give it back to the earth from which it has come... because it is only when you do this that your bucketful becomes a trickle that grows into a stream that grows into the river of life.

When you are thirsty, it is very easy to accept the promise... it is almost impossible to be faithful to the claim.

But if we are not faithful to the claim to recklessly release the water again, the covenant is broken. You will drink all the water in your personal bucket and feel better for a day or two... and then immediately start looking for your next husband...or your next mountain to worship on...or your next drink... and the promise of eternal life will die with you and your empty bucket... out there in the desert.

A happier outcome would be to follow the example of the woman herself, who immediately began to pour out the treasure she had received upon her neighbors... who in turn went back to the source to discover the fountain of life for themselves so that the river began to flow out from Jacob's well into the whole world.

The story ends here, of course... and yet, the story just begins here. To get all the way to our own lives we have to follow the cup of water a bit further downstream into the great dream of St. John the Divine... who traces the flow of the river from the desert into the center of a gleaming city...

SLIDE #7

Where we see that the crystalline waters of the river have given rise to a tree... (big surprise!) This is the tree that, for better or worse, is being seen in more and more places around the synod and even the whole church... This is the tree that I gave you last year as an image of the essential ecology of the church with its root in worship, its work in ministry and mission, and stewardship as both the support structure and the open channel of nourishment that keeps the whole system alive.

SLIDE #8

But growing the tree from this earlier origin, from this previous cup of water, reminds us that everything in your tree grows in response to this seminal “Jesus Event;” that is to say, your moment of being lost but then found... of being dead but now alive... of being either dry as dust or completely under water... that moment when you felt the hand of the Lord reach around behind your head and lift you up and say, “Breathe!”

Once you have plumbed the depths of your own soul and found that moment and the story that surrounds that moment, the tree begins to take shape. Your worship, which calls your roots ever deeper into the underground river, is a response to that encounter by the well. Your stewardship is your decision to return the water of life back to the earth. Your ministry is your best attempt to share a cup of water with the people of your own village... but it is the mission branch more than any other that allows the story to continue into unexplored lands and into future generations.

So we need to spend a little time looking more closely at this mission branch...

SLIDE #9

And as I have drawn this branch... or perhaps I should say this cluster of branches... to me it looks something like this:

The first fruit of the mission branch is Charity. Charity is one expression of the stewardship of wealth or abundance. It is a personal response to a personal situation of want. It is giving a cup of water to a thirsty stranger met in a chance encounter along the journey.

The second fruit of the mission branch is Philanthropy. This is also an expression of the stewardship of wealth, but it dawns with the recognition that there are too many thirsty people out there for you to provide with water. So you start pooling your resources with other baptized saints to build a canal system that will get more water out to more people. We build schools and hospitals and nursing care facilities and food pantries and PADS programs and moms-and-tots programs and daycare buildings and tutoring ministries... and we actually start to see benefit to the community and to the world from doing together what none of us can do all by ourselves.

Charity and Philanthropy are the hallmarks of Christian compassion for the world. They are good and necessary expressions of our mission to call the world into a life-giving and life-changing relationship with Jesus... but they are not the whole mission story or the whole mission branch.

Charity and Philanthropy represent the voluntary redistribution of wealth. Neither of them are expressions of Justice which can be described as the stewardship of power. In a truly just world there is no need for the voluntary sharing of a cup of water or even the voluntary building of a new irrigation system, because in a just world no one has built a dam to restrict the flow of water into certain parts of the land to a trickle in order to flood other parts for speedboats and water skiers. The justice branch of the tree calls us to work together toward the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision where all who are thirsty are simply free to come to the waters.

In our Lutheran Church, in my judgment, we have a long and noble history with the first two mission branches, and we are slowly growing our capacity with regard to the third branch. And we have strong organizational partners available to us to help us nurture these fruits of mission... in this synod particularly, in the form of Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, as it stands at the ready to help you and the members of your congregation imagine ways to strengthen your participation in the work of charity, philanthropy, and justice.

But the fourth fruit of the mission branch is the one that is dying of thirst right now. This is the Testimony branch, which is the stewardship of story. This was the first fruit of mission for the woman at the well and she did it so freely and spontaneously that she dropped her bucket on the ground and completely forgot about bringing her neighbors some actual, literal water to drink. Telling the story was more urgent. Telling the story was the way to get the river flowing. She could not contain the flood that was rising up inside her. How about you?

SLIDE #10

The act of testimony is not just one of telling other people what they should think or believe. Testimony involves the intersection of 4 stories:

1. Your story. Testimony begins with being interested enough in someone's story to want to listen to it and ask them questions about it. This is the central practice of the mission strategy we now call "Accompaniment."

2. My story. Testimony requires a capacity to be vulnerable with the other and to share the experience of being dry in the desert or completely underwater. If you do not know your “Jesus Event” you need to sink your bucket into deeper water to find it. If you do know it, can you risk telling someone else about your encounter with the one who knows and understands “everything you had ever done?”
3. Our story. The exchange of these stories leads to the creation of a new story, which is your relationship with another person. How will you cultivate and steward this new emerging story that has grown out of this chance encounter?
4. The story. How do these three stories connect with the one story that gives meaning and significance to all our stories? Do you know the story well enough to make these connections? If you do not, perhaps you need to do a little “Book of Faith” work and learn to speak the first language of faith more fluently. SLIDE #11

When these 4 stories converge a miracle occurs in our own presence. A brand new, “Jesus event” comes to fruition with the potential not only to change the individuals involved in the sharing, but also with the power to carry the story more deeply into the land... but only if you are willing to release the miracle rather than clinging to it... to allow the seed to fall into the earth and die so that it can create a new tree for next year’s orchard... or to allow that seed to fall into the river to be carried downstream as the beginning of a whole new orchard in a whole new place and a whole new time.

If we are going to thrive and even survive as the Church of Jesus Christ, we must find a way to reawaken our passion for testimony.

If we do not reawaken our passion for testimony our worship, no matter how cool or entertaining we make it, will become a self-indulgence. If we do not reawaken our passion for testimony all of our ministry to one another will be nothing more than nice people doing nice things for their friends. You don’t need a church or a savior to do that. If we do not reawaken our passion for testimony all of our so-called stewardship will be reduced to the drudgery of budgeting and fund raising and panic about not having enough. If we do not reawaken our passion for testimony even our great works of charity and philanthropy and justice will shrivel and die...

Because the story will stop here with us... the covenant will stop here with us trying to claim the promise while rejecting the claim upon us ...the river of life will stop here with us splashing around in our own private pool while the rest of the garden turns into a sand dune in the noontime heat.

There is no expert. There is no program. There is no pastor or professional lay leader or politician or consultant or community organizer who can save you from the claim that Jesus has placed upon you. But what I am banking on is that there might be some way, through our chance encounters with one another along the journey... that there might be a way to tap into the underground reservoir that is already there inside you waiting to be called up and called out.

SLIDE #12

So this year we, who are in positions of synodical leadership, are offering two gifts:

The first is a chance to review a stewardship strategy for the synod that an amazingly talented group of people have been working on this year. Opening up our hearts and our resources is integrated into everything we do hereafter...

The second gift is an effort that we are calling the Turnaround Synod Initiative... and we offer it not because we have the wisdom or the strength or the answers, but because we believe that you do. We are calling up the water from Jacob’s well, now, that still, after all these generations, taps into a pool some 15 ft deep near the foot of Mt. Gerazim.

SLIDE #13

We are calling up the river that washed you all in here today and praying for the high tide that will wash you back out again tomorrow... because the world is still thirsty, sisters and brothers... the world is still thirsty for what you carry in your cup.

Assembly sings, “I Love to Tell the Story”

