



WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2015

Jesus said to her: *‘Give me a drink’*

PREACHING RESOURCE

Jesus said to her: *“Give me a drink”*
(John 4:7)

A cautionary note to preachers – because John 4:7 is very well known in the Christian tradition, people tend to come to the text with many assumptions and presuppositions. Go beyond simply referring to the way that Jesus overturns the conventions of the time by talking to a Samaritan woman, the radical nature of which is shown by the disciples’ reaction to the conversation. Since we believe that biblical texts speak to us in our context, it is essential to point to the ways that our own conventions are overturned.

So Jesus comes to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. In the heat of the day, around noon, Jesus sits by the well. A Samaritan woman comes to draw water, and Jesus says to her, “Give me a drink.”

Stories about wells recur in the biblical text. In Genesis 24, Abraham’s servant sees Rebekah at a well and knows by that encounter that she is indeed the choice for Isaac. Not only does the servant of Abraham see Rebekah at a well, but he asks her for a drink

of water. In Genesis 29, Jacob meets Rachel at a well. In that story, it is Jacob who gives the drink. He gives it to the animals belonging to his relative and Rachel’s father, Laban – the animals that provide the family with its living.

Stories about water also recur in the biblical text. In a land that was and is, to a large extent, desert and rock, water is a precious resource. It is, in a sense, living water all the time, because without it, death will be a swift consequence. The woman Jesus encounters knows of what she speaks when she points out to him that he has no bucket and the well is deep. Jesus, tired from his journey, and no doubt hot and dusty as well, cannot physically drink the water that is necessary for life without the woman’s assistance.

In that time and place, there was tension and even hostility between Jews and Samaritans. There were historical reasons for that, having to do with the results of various invasions, exiles and resettlements of the people. It is an interesting contemporary note that a small number of those who would self-define as Samaritan still live in the region today. The point to note for preaching purposes is that the tension and hostility between Jews and

Samaritans were very real. Many Jews at the time would make a long detour, on foot, when travelling from the north to the south of the land, or from south to north, to avoid entering Samaritan territory. It mattered to both peoples that the Jews insisted on Jerusalem as a major centre of the worship of God, and the Samaritans had their own places of encounter with the Holy One. Yet Jesus does not make a detour. Jesus’ conversation with a Samaritan – and a Samaritan woman, no less – is therefore a rare, if not prohibited, situation. Much as he needs a physical drink of water, Jesus knows that the “living water” he can give will become a spring of water gushing up into eternal life. The Samaritan woman sees, hears and knows in the depth of her being that this “living water,” this “eternal life,” is what she wants, and so she asks for it. Jesus’ response leads to a long theological conversation that may be about the woman’s personal living circumstances, or about the loyalty of her people to five different political and religious entities, or maybe both. Either way, the result is the same: the woman believes in and witnesses to Jesus as the Messiah, and many others hear for themselves that he is the Saviour of the world.

By that simple line, “Give me a drink,” by that simple request made very much in the context of the time and his physical circumstances, Jesus starts a conversation of salvation. That conversation of salvation is held with all parts of the Christian Church. In particular, though not exclusively, we remember during the Week of Prayer for

Christian Unity that the conversation is held with the Church as the one, living body of Christ. It is Christ who initiates conversation with us. It is Christ whose name we bear. It is Christ who promises the living water of eternal life to all manifestations of the Church, his body. It is Christ who enables us to respond when he calls to us. It is Christ who

enables us to hear his call in and through the diversity in unity that is his whole body.

Listen... hear Christ’s voice in the Catholic tradition, in the United Church tradition, in the Presbyterian, Christian Reformed, Anglican, Salvation Army, Armenian Orthodox, Mennonite, Baptist, Pentecostal, Lutheran and so many more dynamic parts of his body.