



Living Water



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2017-03-19-AWW.mp3>.

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John 4:5-42

The Rev. Andrew W. Walter
Grace Episcopal Church
The Third Sunday in Lent
March 19, 2017

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

John 4:15

As our Gospel story opens, the hot, beating sun is directly overhead, as a careworn woman makes her way toward the village well. She follows the same, well-trod path every day, and just by looking at her, you can sense a loneliness, an unhappiness. The woman always walks to the well by herself, while the other women in town all come together, gathering in the cool, early morning to chat and to gossip.

It is hard to know how things got this way. Everyone in town knew about the woman's five husbands, all of who had died or moved on, leaving her to depend on a man who wasn't her husband. It was quite a scandal at the time, and maybe that is why the woman is all alone.

Whatever the reason, it is pretty clear: life has not been kind to this woman. Like everyone else, she once had hopes and dreams, things she wanted to do in life, but as time passed by, and those hopes and dreams became memories, the woman slowly learned to settle, to settle for less than she desired, until finally, she reached the point where she is now. Now, she is numb to the joy of living and spends her days in an endless, continuous loop of the same routine, the same chores, like walking to the well to fetch water.

On this particular day, though, she arrives at the well to find a stranger, a young Jewish man, sitting there. The woman gives the man a furtive glance, as she goes to fill her bucket, when suddenly, the man speaks to her, asking her for a drink of water. This catches the woman completely off guard, because Jews don't share things with Samaritans, but the woman quickly realizes this is no ordinary Jew. Somehow, the young man seems to know her, as if he can see right through her, understanding her deepest thoughts and feelings, and so when he offers her something in return, the woman can't help herself. The words come gushing out: "*Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty.*"

While the woman at the well was willing to settle for less, Jesus wanted her to experience more. Jesus came that everyone might have life, and have life abundantly, but that was not happening for the woman. Jesus knew the woman was thirsty. He could tell her bucket was empty, not of water from the well, but of meaning and joy, something to look forward to, a reason to get up in the

morning. So, Jesus offered the woman living water, because he could see she wasn't alive. He could tell the woman was dead inside, because she had been drinking dead water.

We all know what dead water is. Dead water is living in the past, longing for the way things were. It's looking for answers at the bottom of a bottle; having the same old argument with your partner or spouse. Dead water is being closed off to new ideas and new possibilities. It's always comparing yourself to others; not believing in your own abilities; keeping your emotions all bottled up inside. Dead water is that water you drink which still leaves you thirsty and longing for something more. We all know dead water, because dead water is easy to find.¹

This season of Lent, our book discussion group is reading the bestseller, *Just Mercy*, by Bryan Stevenson, which recounts his efforts to defend the poor, wrongly condemned, and those trapped in our criminal justice system. One of the storylines weaved throughout the book is that of Walter McMillian, an African-American from the small town of Monroeville, Alabama.

Back in 1987, the community of Monroeville was shocked by the murder of a young, white woman, and despite taking place right in town, at the local cleaners, there were no leads, no suspects. As weeks turned into months, and community outrage increased, the authorities needed an arrest, and Walter McMillian became their scapegoat. Prosecutors found informants to testify against Walter, and evidence was suppressed, including dozens of witnesses, who could support Walter's alibi.

The trial lasted a day and a half. The predominantly white jury found Walter guilty, sentencing him to life in prison, but the presiding judge, Judge Robert E. Lee Key, Jr., overruled the jury and gave Walter the death penalty.

When Bryan Stevenson took over the case, he was surprised by the lack of credible evidence. Stevenson filed motions and appeals on Walter's behalf. He found further evidence to support Walter, even got the prosecutor's main witness, their informant, to recant his story. But, the authorities and justice system wouldn't budge. They fought Stevenson every step of the way, opposing every motion, every appeal, until finally, the case garnered national attention, including a segment on *60 Minutes* by Ed Bradley. Then, and only then, did the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals overturn Walter's conviction, and then, and only then, did the district attorney drop the case.

Walter McMillian spent six years on death row – six years! – because the authorities were so filled with hatred and prejudice and bias. They were committed to keeping Walter in his place. What they did was wrong, and they were unwilling to admit it. Even when the evidence was overwhelmingly against them, the authorities would not give, would not change their minds, would not do what was right. They were just so stuck in their beliefs and their ways.

¹ The Very Rev. Sam Candler

Reading through Stevenson's book, I found myself filled with anger at the injustice of it all, but I was also reminded of a deep truth about the human condition: we all fall short in the eyes of God. No matter who we are, we're not always at our best, don't always live up to our highest ideals, don't always make the most out of life.

The criminal justice system continues to victimize African-Americans, people just like Walter McMillian. Elected officials are divided by party line and decades-old arguments, rather than coming together for the common good. Churches don't adjust as the religious landscape changes all around us, because "we've never done it that way." And, each of us turn our back on God, as well.

We all drink dead water.

After year of fighting for justice, Bryan Stevenson realized this for himself. Toward the end of his book, he writes:

After working for more than twenty-five years, I understood that I don't do what I do because it's required or necessary or important. I don't do it because I have no choice.

I do what I do because I'm broken, too...

We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent...

Sometimes we're fractured by the choices we make; sometimes we're shattered by things we would never have chosen. But, our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis of our shared search for comfort, meaning and healing.

The season of Lent is a time to ponder our brokenness. It's a time to acknowledge our buckets are empty. All of us are searching for comfort and meaning and healing – it's part of being human. We are all that careworn woman, making her way to the well, walking the same, well-trod path.

But, today, a young, Jewish man is sitting there, offering us a drink of living water, and all we have to do is choose to notice him and respond²: *Sir, give me this water, so that I may never again.*

Amen.

² Walter Bruegemann, *Inscribing the Text*