

Well Spring

“God fills you.”

John 4:7-15

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Royal Oak First United Methodist Church, Royal Oak, Michigan

Thirst

There can be a certain joy to running. Don't believe the conclusion that some non-runners express, that if you look at the faces of runners you'll see they're always frowning and writhing with pain. That's just what gravity does when a runner's feet strike the pavement. The truth is: those who get into it can take joy in it.

I used to run a lot more than I have recently. In fact, there was a time a dozen years ago that Laura suggested I enter a rather long race in Grand Rapids called The Old Kent River Run, scheduled to take place in May, the day after my 48th birthday. It would be 25 kilometers long – 15.5 miles. That's well-over a half marathon: a real challenge just to complete.

You can't do something like that willy-nilly. It takes weeks, even months of training: each day engaging a given routine, some days running longer and farther than others; some days interweaving distances covered in slow, easy lopes with spans that are run in all-out sprints. Some days you are even supposed to take a break, giving your body a chance to rest and recover. And you build up your distances, preparing your muscles and heart and lungs to easily bear a long race.

Once-a-week you put in a very long run, longer than the weeks before. Seven miles, ten, twelve, fourteen: by the time the day comes, your body is fully ready, even itching for the race.

One warm Saturday in April I set out to take a trial run of the whole 15 ½ mile course. I took what I judged to be plenty of water; but about 13 miles into the run, my supply ran completely dry. The sun seemed to beat down harder as I kept going, pushing, and feeling the increasing stress of going dry. It doesn't take long before you can run into real trouble. So I pushed another mile, and another, and finally the last half mile when I got to the end where there was, thankfully, a food stand.

I wanted something very wet and very cold, so I went in to order the largest Pepsi they had; and it went down cool and sweet and completely refreshing; and it took care of me...for only a little while. I wasn't yet aware that the phosphates in soda pop can

actually make matters worse when you are in real need of good water. Still in the car on the way home my mouth got to feeling dry and my muscles began to cramp. I started shivering.

For all that I had to drink, I was dehydrated.

Have you ever had that kind of thirst in your soul?

Quenching

Jesus was on his way through foreign territory and sat down, physically thirsty, himself. It was about noon, when all the decent folk were at home taking their naps. That's when the woman came to draw her supply of water. Already the story is full of information. Something was going on here: a woman going about her business at the well when no one was present, taker her turn at the public gathering place. You know at once that something about her rendered her a social pariah: one who lacked real worth.

That was the truth. We learn later in the story that she was living the sort of life that made her an outcast. Who knows why she wound up like this? Widowed already five times, I imagine she wasn't on the dating list of very many eligible bachelors. And women of her time and place didn't really have much of any rights, so perhaps the only guy willing to take her on would be someone disinclined to make a commitment. At any rate, she had now become the sort of person that everyone would stay away from because mere association with her would risk their social standing. No one was going to talk with her.¹

She was a failure. And by the looks of it, she accepted this as a given, final verdict on her life. How do you get past something like that, other than try to make the best of a bad situation and settle for a lot less than you ever thought you'd get out of life?

That's a thirsty place for the soul. When you don't measure up, what do you do?

Most people I observe seem to do one of two things. They work harder and still feel inadequate, or they give up altogether. Either way, they wind up with an emptiness in their heart: a thirst, and they try to quench it with more food or more alcohol or more work...

And it never works. It's like chugging down a Pepsi when what you need is a drink of clear, cool water.

The woman came to the well spiritually dehydrated until she made contact with Jesus. Jesus, who knew all about her. Jesus, who crossed the walls that were supposed to separate them: he spoke to a woman – and women in those days had no status; he spoke to a Samaritan – a people that Jesus' people categorically hated; he spent time with a person who was outcast even by her own community. It turns out that Jesus deemed her of higher value than she had come to value herself.

Jesus made contact. And this was worship...even though worship was probably the furthest thing from her mind.

Worship is focused contact with God. Praise and adoration, confession, prayer, learning, proclaiming, even fellowshiping: it's all these things. But boiled down this is what worship is: it's simply focused contact with God. And when you come into contact with God: something happens. It changes things.

Your thirst is quenched.

Jesus said to the woman, "The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life."

You can come into worship spiritually dehydrated as all get-out, sit down, go through some of the motions and somehow, some way: make contact. And you can wind up like the woman at the well. No longer sending the bucket down the hole to bring up a little relief here and a little relief there. (I'm speaking metaphorically now). No longer going to the pump at camp, pushing the handle up and down with half the water splashing at your feet, then carrying it back to the campsite and repeat the routine again and again all day. No longer even having to turn on a tap.

You can wind up with an artesian spring of spiritual water: an on-going supply in your soul. Forgiven for everything you've ever done. Encouraged for anything you have to go through. Mended and made whole from any way you've been snapped in two.

That's what can happen when you have focused contact with God. And it doesn't depend on whether you worship in Samaria or the Jerusalem, at Saddleback Church in California, or First United Methodist Church in Royal Oak. Just that you meet God in spirit and truth. It doesn't matter what style of a worship or how good the worship leaders are for this to happen.

Once we went to a church over the 4th of July weekend. It was a different kind of church, one that's pretty modern as far as the worship experience is concerned: a huge, theater-like auditorium with cup holders on the arms of the seats and a huge stage up-front; a pretty decent band playing gospel in hard-rock; screens showing a variety of video meant to excite the senses; the pastor doing a good job teaching through the message; state of the art sound and light so the production was done near to perfection.

It was nice. Since it was the 4th, the band played something that was supposed to be both spiritual and patriotic as the video screens showed images of our military in action and the American flag waving in the wind. They moved into the National Anthem played by synthesizers and guitars and drums and suddenly, at the conclusion the pyrotechnics went off around the stage from above and below.

That could have been moving. I have been moved in contemporary worship before.

But I'll tell you, I don't need fireworks to make contact with God.

In fact, God has moved me in old clapboard country churches with pianos out-of-tune. Circles of campers worshiping around a campfire. Stained glass washed sanctuaries where Communion is observed by the most formal of liturgies that some parts are sung in Gregorian chant.

Because all worship needs to be is focused contact with God.

Contact

Each morning we make contact with each other with handshakes and hugs; we exchange *Good morning's*, *How are ya's?* and *Peace, in the name of Christ*. It's a means of grace when we do that, you know. Worship in solitude is fine; but God intends for us to worship as gathered saints making contact with each other.

Then we join hands and sing,

Jesus, O Jesus: come and fill your lambs.

Jesus, O Jesus: come and fill your lambs.

And that's what can happen. I've seen it happen – and not just once. One time it was a guy who had been struggling with an addiction he didn't want anyone to know about. But he kept it hidden and managed it and managed the shame it generated day after day, year-after-year. It was like something had him by the throat and any time he

wanted to break free of it and run away, the thing just tightened its grip on him and wouldn't let him go. But one day he went into worship like he'd worshiped before and something happened.

He heard something or sang something or maybe it was both: and there was contact. It was an informal worship, so he had a chance to name the shame: he told some others what it was, out loud; and put their hands on his head; they prayed for him. And I saw him as he was released. Made whole. Given a new life so he could live again.

That's what can happen when God makes contact: and it's not going to be just a splash of Pepsi that soon leaves you dry.

Just the real thing: cool and refreshing as an artesian well within.

Good enough for relief from spiritual dehydration. Good enough to fill you with life.

¹ Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John," The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, vol. IX. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1995. pp 565-566.