

My Cup Runneth Empty

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

 *John 4:7-26*

She had come to the well alone and she had had five husbands. She had come to the well alone and she had had five husbands. And on top of it, she was a foreigner; a Samaritan. She was one of those you were supposed to be afraid of. If you were to ask her for it she could produce for you a resume of reasons for why you should not speak to her. The women from the village when they came to the well for water they would always come together – catching up on the local village news, helping each other while they drew from the well. But she had come to the well alone, because she had had five husbands. She made them feel uncomfortable. And it's not that she was loose or immoral – you don't have to be much of a Bible student to know that that wasn't the case. This was a first century Palestinian woman. She had no power to marry or divorce. She had been passed around by the men of the village. She had been used and dispensed with. She had been abused, quite frankly. A first century #MeToo. So she had a story that everybody stayed away from – and there she was at the well with her bucket. The abused foreigner. And the last person she expected to have a kind conversation with was a Jewish rabbi. But before she knows it she's talking to this rabbi and they're talking about buckets. And the rabbi wants to know what she's going to do with her bucket – because she's got some holes in her bucket. And she keeps having to fill it up and she never seems to have enough water to quench her thirst. And isn't there a better way? And she finally figures it out that the rabbi isn't talking

about her bucket bucket – he's talking about her bucket bucket. She's got a leaky bucket. Life has punched enough holes in her – and she can't quite seem to hold onto what she needs to hold onto. And she has to keep filling it up with whatever she can get her hands on – in order to have something. And the rabbi says – you know I know about some water that when you put it in the bucket it doesn't leak out the bottom. It's kind of like that fix a flat stuff – you know the stuff you put into your tire – and the air not only fills the tire but fixes the leak. Jesus says, I've got this living water ... and when you put it in your bucket it not only fills it but it fixes the leak. It repairs the wound. It mends the tear. It plugs the hole. And before you know it – your bucket isn't leaking it's overflowing. "Here," Jesus says. And he holds out a ladle of this crisp, cool water. "Take a sip," he says. "See what you think."

A businessman asks me to lunch. First time. He's never asked me to lunch before. When I arrive at the restaurant I notice his wife is dropping him off. "What's up?" I ask. "Your car in the shop?" "That's why I asked you to lunch," he says after we've sat down and ordered. "I got a DUI – lost my license. And I might be on my way to losing my marriage." And he goes on to telling me about his having one too many one too many times. And pressure at work. And not many friends. And I didn't think life was going to go this way. And he puts onto the table this old bucket – and it's got some holes in it and he's keeps trying to fill this leaky old bucket with booze and Lord knows what else – and there just doesn't seem to be enough of it. There's just too many leaks. And what the heck am I going to do?

A recent college graduate comes to my office – and I think she's come to talk about what calling and mission she might want to pursue – but instead she hands me this bucket. And it's got

a big hole in the bottom. And she tells me that when she was a little girl an uncle abused her. Many, many times. And it put this huge gash in the bottom of her bucket – and now she's cutting herself and sleeping around rather indiscriminately – and she keeps pouring this stuff into the bucket but her bucket never seems to fill.

A high school junior sits across from me at the coffee shop – put there to talk to me under orders from his parents. His grades are bad, he's quit the soccer team and he's running around with the wrong crowd. He's a good kid, I've known him since before his baptism. But his father is a workaholic and a taskmaster and emotionally unavailable. He gets more excited over his new deal at work than over his boy's all-star selection. And though he is quite reluctant to do so – he let's me look at his bucket – just enough to see the cracks in the side.

It didn't take long after I was ordained to the ministry to figure out that each and every human soul is walking around carrying a bucket. In fact it might be more accurate to say that every

single human soul is a bucket. A vessel for that unique blend of human and Holy Spirit. From the very beginning of our days we have been walking around carrying this receptacle of spirit – this container of invisible matter. And it didn't take me long to realize every single one of our buckets have some holes, some cracks. That's just the way life works – it puts holes in your bucket. Wounds in the vessel of the spirit. It's unavoidable. It goes with the territory. Life hurts. Life is unfair. For some maybe the cracks are tiny – for others maybe they're gaping. For some they wounds are self-inflicted and for others they have been inflicted upon. But suffice it to say leaks abound and we all are trying to figure out how to keep the bucket full.

So Jesus tells the Samaritan woman about this living water – and for a while she doesn't quite get it. She's looking around for some other well, some other bucket, some other ladle – but then it dawns on her – the living water of which the rabbi speaks – is in the fact that the rabbi is speaking and speaking to her. While the village treats her like a pariah and the menfolk pass her

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one from the other – here’s a Jewish rabbi who thinks enough of her to see her as a beautiful living soul. And what is happening as the rabbi takes the time to talk with her – is that grace is being poured into her soul – unconditional love is being showered upon her -- and just like that fix a flat stuff – the holes are being filled and the cracks are being sealed.

Because you see that’s what grace does – that’s what unconditional love does – that’s what divine mercy does. When we allow ourselves to get within earshot of the Savior – his word to us is that there is nothing we have to do make ourselves acceptable. There’s nothing we have to do gain the pleasure and pride of God. There’s nothing we have to do to earn our place in the world. When the Savior comes and sits next to us – his only hope is to fill us with this living, gracious water that fills the vessel of our souls with his spirit - and the spirit rushes to all the cracks and the holes and over time – the more we let the grace in – over time the cracks and holes begin to fill and we begin to fill with it.

You see you can’t really talk about the overflow life – you can’t really have any expectation to overflow with generosity – until you have first opened yourself up to receive the gracious, healing and loving spirit of Jesus. Because until we receive the gracious, healing and loving spirit of Jesus – we’re always going to be focused on filling our buckets with stuff that never seems to quench our thirst. And I when I say stuff I mean stuff. The latest and greatest thing. The latest and greatest buzz. The latest and greatest high. Stuff, like Chinese food, that when you eat it – you’re hungry again in about 15 minutes. And it’s because the holes are still there. But when you finally come to realize that the greatest love of all – the love of our Creator – is a love directed

straight toward you – a love that you don’t have to perform for or earn – a love that loves you wounds and all -- then all of a sudden you start filling and your start overflowing.

For a long time I have followed the work of a ministry called Covenant House that began in New York City a long time ago. Covenant House is a ministry to runaway teenagers that’s made its way to other parts of the country. The Philadelphia ministry for a long time was served by a Greek Orthodox priest name Father Steve Sinian – who made it much of his mission to walk the streets of North Philadelphia where he grew up and befriend these lost teenagers. To befriend these kids who were using; who were homeless; who were prostituting themselves. Kids with big holes in their buckets. In one of the newsletters of the ministry years ago they published a letter from one of these teenagers – a young woman who had gotten pregnant way too early in life and who had been influenced by the good Father. Here’s a part of her letter:

Dear Father Steve:

I just wanted to write you because there’s some things I really want to say to you. First, thank you. I truly believe God puts people in our lives for a reason. I believe you were put in mine to save mine, and I thank you for your strength and faith to carry God’s will out ... You never looked down on me or made me feel like I was just a worthless waste of flesh. That’s how I felt. Instead you showed me you cared and you believed I was worth something. The person I was out there was never really me. I even felt like a failure ‘cause I couldn’t kill myself the right way. I used to think even God didn’t want my life. Well now I know I was right about God not wanting my life but only because he wanted me to have it.

I’m grateful today just to sleep in a bed and wake up with a roof over my head. I don’t want material things I just want me. The best thing of all is my son learned to tie his shoes and couldn’t wait to tell me and you what he was able dot do? Double knotting. That to me is a gift by itself. So I just wanted to say thank you for teaching me to have a little faith in m myself. I’ll tell you this is one gift from God I won’t be returning. Love, D.

“I don’t want material things,” says D., “I just want me.” You know, when we get called to the communion table – I think we get called back to ourselves. And when we find ourselves we don’t want the stuff anymore. We just want us. It’s what we want the most – ourselves. Not ourselves as defined by somebody else, not ourselves as defined by our past story -- but ourselves as defined by the one whose idea it was to put us here. The one whose word to us is grace – pure grace. He pours his love into us – just like pouring full that chalice – and he says – this is who you are – a vessel of grace. A vessel of unconditional love. Living water. All the way over the top. My cup runneth over. And man when your cup runs over – it means that somebody else that gets quenched.



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