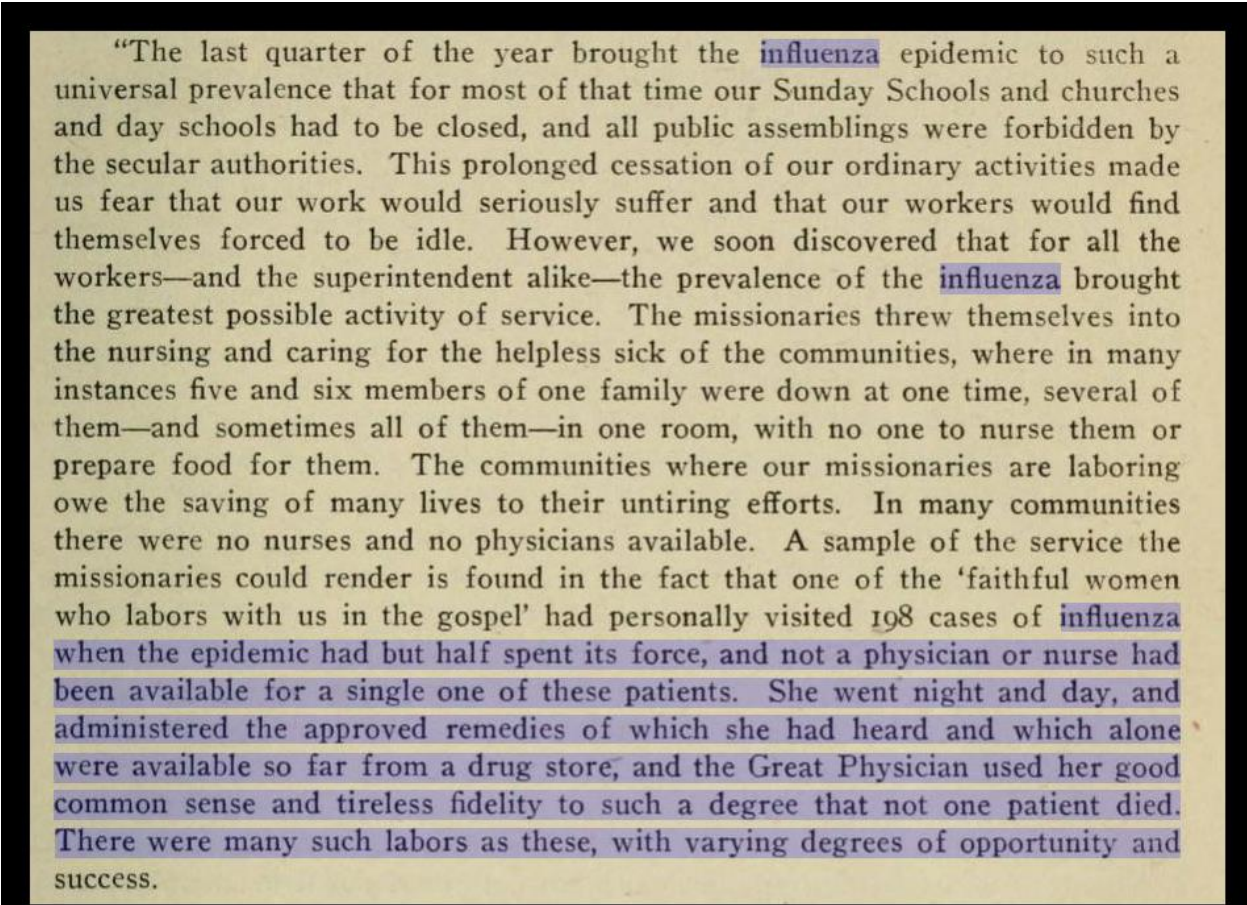


“Seeking: Will You Give Me a Drink?”
John 4:5-26

One of the things that I found myself searching for when the COVID-19 pandemic started was how the church reacted during the flu pandemic of 1918. It was hard to find anything on it in any of our historical records. Presbyterians are known for keeping the best records and statistics. But in this case, there was no mention of that pandemic and how the church reacted. I had to go to the wider church to find anything. To my surprise, I found out that our church, like other churches around the country, did not have worship services for several months, even for Christmas. Here is a sample of what I found through the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia.



“The last quarter of the year brought the **influenza** epidemic to such a universal prevalence that for most of that time our Sunday Schools and churches and day schools had to be closed, and all public assemblings were forbidden by the secular authorities. This prolonged cessation of our ordinary activities made us fear that our work would seriously suffer and that our workers would find themselves forced to be idle. However, we soon discovered that for all the workers—and the superintendent alike—the prevalence of the **influenza** brought the greatest possible activity of service. The missionaries threw themselves into the nursing and caring for the helpless sick of the communities, where in many instances five and six members of one family were down at one time, several of them—and sometimes all of them—in one room, with no one to nurse them or prepare food for them. The communities where our missionaries are laboring owe the saving of many lives to their untiring efforts. In many communities there were no nurses and no physicians available. A sample of the service the missionaries could render is found in the fact that one of the ‘faithful women who labors with us in the gospel’ had personally visited 198 cases of **influenza when the epidemic had but half spent its force, and not a physician or nurse had been available for a single one of these patients. She went night and day, and administered the approved remedies of which she had heard and which alone were available so far from a drug store, and the Great Physician used her good common sense and tireless fidelity to such a degree that not one patient died. There were many such labors as these, with varying degrees of opportunity and success.**

I wondered how this could be! That pandemic spread to 22 million Americans, of whom 675,000 lost their lives. That number meant more people died because of the flu than those who died fighting the WWI, WW II, and the Vietnam War. The only thing that seemed to stay with us from that pandemic is the use of little communion cups which became a solution for stopping the spread of disease in church.

It seems to me that we tend to want to move on from such stories of deep vulnerability as quickly as possible. People wanted to forget what happened as it was overwhelming to our sense of security. Yet, in our vulnerability lies the depth of spirit and connection that we so desperately need and long for.

The good news of our faith is that God in Jesus gave us an incredible example of the power of vulnerability. In our Bible story for today, we hear about an encounter Jesus had with a Samaritan woman at a well. I usually focus in this story on the woman and her background, but today I would like to invite us to look at it from the perspective of Jesus, a Jewish teacher who is passing through a Samaritan territory. The Samaritans were considered resident aliens in the land and represented to the Jews the accommodation and compromise of the Jews who during the time of Exile married foreigners and followed the religions of other nations. There were so many differences and disagreements between the Jews and the Samaritans that Jesus couldn't have picked a worse enemy of his people to ask water from. All the norms of Jewish society at the time would have put Jesus above this woman. As a man he would have been seen as superior to a woman. As a Jew, he would have been seen as superior to a Samaritan. As a rabbi, a Jewish teacher, he would have been expected to stay away from touching or getting a drink from a Samaritan woman.

The location of the encounter is also very important. In the biblical tradition, when people were told about a man encountering a woman at a well, they would have expected a marriage proposal to happen. In Genesis 24, Isaac and Rebekah are the first couple in the Bible whose love story begins at a well. A little bit later in Genesis, Jacob and Rachel also begin their love story at a well. In Exodus 2, Moses meets Zipporah at the well, and they later get married. Here is the pattern of such stories according to the Bible Project:

- Journey: Someone journeys to a foreign country
- Woman at the well: The man encounters a woman at a well
- Draws water: Someone draws water from the well
- News: The woman hurries home to bring news of the visitor
- Hospitality: The visitor stays with the woman's family and there is mention of a meal
- Joining: The two parties are joined as one

The same pattern is followed in this story, but the big surprise is that Jesus offers the woman a spiritual union, instead of what people normally expect to happen between a man and a woman.

Let's listen to a part of this story according to John 4:5-26

⁵ So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

¹⁰ Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

¹¹ “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?”

¹³ Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

¹⁵ The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

¹⁶ He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

¹⁷ “I have no husband,” she replied.

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸ The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

¹⁹ “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

²¹ “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

²⁵ The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

²⁶ Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

Jesus is the one who starts the sharing and the act of vulnerability by asking for water. He opens his life to this stranger, representing all the things that he should avoid, to share that he was thirsty and that he needed help. He had no way of drawing water out of the well. He was willing to ask for help from a very unlikely source! We can learn so much from this. Jesus saw in the woman a potential disciple and partner in ministry. Despite all the social labels she had, he was able to see her spiritual gifts and that she was enough. I love the depiction of this story in the artwork of Lauren Wright Pittman in this painting called, “The Living Water.” One of the striking things in this image is that Jesus and the woman are sitting close and at eye level.



When the exchange of the living waters happens, it requires this kind of vulnerability and sharing. When God seeks us, it is often in vulnerable and sometimes easy to overlook ways. The invitation is to be in that place of openness and vulnerability. Think in your life about the people where you have exchanged living water with. They are often the people with whom you can be vulnerable. It is people who are willing to sit at the well with you at eye level and who are willing to be vulnerable with you. The same is true of our connection to God. Our connection to God deepens when we are willing to see God in all the vulnerabilities of life and when we learn to open our hearts to God about our thirst for the living water. In those moments, we learn to trust that God sees us not as broken people or through our social labels of success or failure, but as partners in responding to the thirst of those around us.

We are going to spend a few moments to reflect on this story in verse 11 as it relates to our own lives or world.

A Time with Jesus at the Well of Your Life

Take time to share with Jesus like the Samaritan woman did. Tell Jesus about the challenges you are facing:

- “You have no cup” (energy, money, status, qualifications, health, power, security, etc.).
- “The well is deep” (the problem is BIG).
- “How will you get the living water?” How can you access the "living water" (hope, joy, vitality, life in Christ or whatever it symbolizes)?
- Who might be the unexpected person with a cup to help you draw the living water from the deep well?

Amen.