

“Give Me a Drink” / John 4:5-29 / 23 March 2014

“Give me a drink,” Jesus says to the stranger at the well. Not a “could you,” or a “would you,” or a “please.” Just “give me a drink,” perhaps with an exhausted sigh, dusty, and footsore, and far from home. The woman doesn't know Jesus from Vladimir Putin. And most strangers bristle when you give them a command instead of a greeting. Perhaps she did bristle. Ah, but Jesus is always turning up on the margins of our world, demanding a drink, and blessed are you if you will lower your defenses, if you will lower your bucket to the water...and obey. Those who touch our lives most profoundly are very often the ones who come with open hands, asking for much, offering little, placing demands, like “Give me a drink.”

I wonder if she actually did give him a drink. And did Jesus ever say “thank you”? The text doesn't say. But shouldn't kindness to strangers just be a “given”? Here in Pittsburgh, it is standard road etiquette to let people make left turns in front of you. Go to the Internet website “Urban Dictionary,” and type in the expression “Pittsburgh Left,” and it will say exactly this: “A Pittsburgh Left is making a left turn just as the light turns green, pulling out before the oncoming traffic. Most people in Pittsburgh allow and encourage this behavior.” Drivers in this town are forever waving other drivers into their lane. They take turns at on-ramps, even giving up their right of way. But here's the strange thing: Many folks don't even bother to give the “thank you” wave when you allow them to cut in front of you. They don't think there's anything to thank. It's just a matter of being a decent human being behind the wheel. In fact, letting other people go first is so much a part of how Pittsburghers drive that I've seen people get angry when a driver who has the right of way actually keeps the right of way.

Now, there is an invisible line somewhere between Carlisle and Harrisburg where all of that roadway courtesy dissolves right quickly. On the east side of that line, you can pause to let someone turn onto the road in front of you, but they will remain right where they are. They'll sit there and stare at you with annoyance, refusing your courtesy, and wondering why you're holding up traffic. Perhaps they're suspicious of your motives, as if the only reason to let another person cut in front of you is so that you can follow them home and rob them. I have a theory that, if drivers here are more courteous, it's because people sense, deep down, that we're all victims of geography around here. These hills, and valleys, and streambeds are the enemy, not the other driver. All drivers here share a common foe, namely the hopelessly tangled mess of steep, winding, one-way streets. We've got to help each other out. We expect other drivers to make room for us, and we might not give them a thank-you-honk when they do it, but never fear! When the shoe is on the other foot, as it very soon will be, we will do the same thing for them. I like the unspoken assumption that kindness to strangers is just their due, that there's really nothing to thank. Being treated well is just one of the many benefits that we human beings owe to each other.

Here sits Jesus, resting his tired feet on the long hike from Capernaum to Jerusalem, which is a little over one hundred miles. He's stopped off in Samaria, at about midpoint, to get some water. His friends have gone into the village to buy food. Now, a nice Jewish man was not supposed to speak to a solitary woman. And he definitely wasn't supposed to drink from any cup or vessel carried by a gentile. It was just against the rules in those days. And yet, perhaps Jesus too believes that kindness to strangers is the first and most important rule, for he looks at this Samaritan woman and says to her quite simply, “Give me a drink.”

It's tempting to make this sermon to be about how Jesus embraces the outsider, for this woman has many strikes against her in Jesus' world. She's been a serial monogamist five times over, and now she's decided that maybe marriage isn't for her—except for the fun parts—for she's not married but she does have a lover. She's the wrong ethnicity, the wrong religion, the wrong gender in that world. The gospel writer John seems to be holding this disreputable woman up as a foil to the great and powerful Nicodemus, whose story we read last week. Nicodemus was a proper, respected religious leader; this poor woman doesn't even get a name in John's account.

It's tempting to emphasize the fact that Jesus valued this so-called nobody. He was impatient with the great Nicodemus. But to this brash, argumentative, uneducated foreign woman, he is kind. He explains his metaphors to her. He listens to her views. He asks to drink her water. This story of the Samaritan woman is good news to anyone who has ever felt like a nobody. It's good news to all the seeming-nobodies in your life or mine, the people we don't really see, the people who matter little to us, and whom we pass by without much regard. It's tempting to make this sermon to be about how the ones who don't matter to us do matter to God. But most of us already know that. We're not always mindful of it, but we know it.

And yet, I'd like to call your attention to the fact that Jesus is the beggar here, the one asking for help. Jesus comes into this woman's life making demands of her, asking for much and offering little. But in the end, he—the beggar—gives her as much as you or I could ever give another person: He gives her his attention. He sees her, hears her, values her, treats her with respect. Isn't that the way it often goes? It is very often the one who comes to us with open hands, the one who asks much and offers little, the one who does not say “please” or “thanks,” ironically, it is very often *that* one who ends up giving us more than we give him or her. Besides, we do not offer kindness in order to be thanked. Kindness is a stranger's due, his or her right as a human.

The first time Michelle and I hosted dinner for Family Promise, when four homeless families were eating and sleeping in our church building, there was one young mother who asked much. When we called her to dinner, she looked at what we offered and said, “Is there anything leftover from last night?” She wanted things we didn't have, diet soda, Tabasco sauce. We broke to her the bad news that what you see is what you get, and she nodded sadly, as if our failures were just more of life's disappointments. It was a little discouraging at first, but a week later in the mail, I found the kindest “thank you” card from this same young mother. Other Family Promise guests had expressed their gratitude verbally, but to date, this is still the only card we've ever received; this particular young woman is the only one who bothered to purchase a card, look up our address, write down her thoughts, put a stamp on it, and stick it in the mail. And yet, what if she had never said thank you? Would we still find joy in hosting Family Promise again the next time. Yes! We don't do it for the thanks. We do it because kindness is what we owe to other human beings.

Perhaps the ones you must help will never be able to thank you. Help them anyway. Maybe the ones you must love will never have the capacity to love you back. Love them anyway. It could be that the one you must forgive will never even reach the place in this life where he or she can ask for your forgiveness. This is indeed very hard. But if you can forgive that person anyway, then your joy will be full. Isn't it in loving that we find love, in giving that we receive, in accepting that we are accepted? But someone has to make that first step. Who stands on the margins of your life, placing demands? Those who touch our lives most profoundly are very often the ones who come with open hands, asking for much, offering little, placing demands, like “Give me a drink.” Amen.