"Living Waters" November 8, 2026
John 4:3-29 Westminster, Greenville
Commitment Sunday Ben Dorr
****

I'm wondering if you have ever had a conversation with someone, in which you're talking about one thing, but you come to realize, during the course of the conversation, that maybe you're really talking about something else?

There's the conversation that's ON THE SURFACE.
And the conversation that's BELOW THE SURFACE.

Let me give you an example.

Those of you who were in church a few weeks ago may remember my internal drama—with being given a senior discount at Publix two weeks in a row this fall…

Do you remember this?

So, an update:
I'm back at Publix this past week, and it's a different clerk checking out my groceries, and the first item she scans is a Paul Newman frozen pizza.

And she says to me, with a smile on her face, "Paul Newman. Now he was a great actor. Are you old enough to remember who Paul Newman was?"

And I thought: "Aha! Now that's a clever way to see if I qualify for a senior discount."

So I said, “Oh, sure. ‘The Sting,’ with Newman and Robert Redford…that’s one of my favorite movies.”

She smiled. And she returned serve, if you will, and mentioned a Paul Newman movie that I had NEVER seen...not good, I thought to myself, she’s testing me here.

So I said, “I haven’t seen that one you just mentioned, ma’am, but how about ‘Cool Hand Luke’…did you see that?”

I figured, “Cool Hand Luke” is a good 5 or 6 years older than “The Sting.”

And she smiled, and said, “Now that’s a sad one.”
And I thought: “Yeah, she’s going to give me the discount.”

And then I thought:
“Wait a minute—what am I doing? I don’t qualify for the senior discount. Am I actually trying to fool this clerk into believing that I do??”

So I said to her, “Ma’am, I’m old enough to remember Paul Newman—but I am not quite old enough yet to get the senior discount.”

And she looked at me.
And this time she didn’t smile.
She just had this puzzled look, like:
“What are you talking about? I just wanted to know if you knew who Paul Newman was….”

******

Maybe I just need to stop going to Publix on Wednesdays.
I don’t know.
I do know this.

We run into similar confusion—
a conversation that's on the surface,
and a conversation that's below the surface—
right off the bat in our text for today.

Jesus is traveling through Samaria.
He comes to a well and sits down.
And a Samaritan woman comes to draw water.

So, Jesus says to her, "Give me a drink."

Now, does Jesus want a drink of water?
Sure he does.
He's tired. He's thirsty.
He's been walking all morning.

And yet, you may have noticed in this story—Jesus never actually drinks any water.

The woman doesn't give him water.
Instead, she asks a question.

"How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

To which Jesus says:

"If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

Do you see what's going on?
On the surface, it's just a conversation about being thirsty,
needing water…

But below the surface…
it quickly becomes a conversation about
a different kind of thirst, and a different kind of water.

******

What was the woman at the well thirsty for?
John doesn't tell us.
But I think we get some clues from our text.

First of all, the way John describes her, she's an OUTSIDER.

A Samaritan—do you remember the antagonism that existed between Samaritans and Jews back in Jesus's day? There's this little-known scene in Luke's Gospel in which Samaritans refuse to receive Jesus, because "his face is set toward Jerusalem," and James and John respond by asking Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

Thankfully, Jesus rebukes James and John for their response.
But you get the point.

The Gospel writer John just says:
"Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans."

Second, this is a woman who has had five husbands, and the man whom she is living with at that time is not her husband. Please, do not picture her as the biblical version of Elizabeth Taylor!

This woman would not have had a choice in being married. We do not know what happened to her husbands in each of those marriages.

What we do know is that she would not have had a voice…
in what had happened to her in her life.

No voice regarding her place, her standing, her worth.

And then, one day, she goes to get water from the well.
And there's a stranger there.

And this Jewish man does not ignore her.
He talks with her.
He listens to her.

He tells her who he is…
and even more astonishing, he tells her who she is.

Do you remember what she says to the people in her town?
"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!"

In other words, Jesus says to the woman:
I know you.
I know your pain. I know your hurts. I know your hopes.

<u>You are necessary! Your life matters to me!</u>

I think that has something to do with what the woman at the well was thirsty for…

Now, that's the woman at the well back in Jesus' day.

But may I suggest that this problem—
the problem of mattering, of being known,
of being necessary—
is just as relevant in our day?

In a recent blog post, "the mathematician Scott Aaronson recounts what his 9-year-old son told his wife," Dana. Dana is a computer scientist, and one day, their boy—who had been paying attention to all the news that AI is generating of late—he says to his mother:

"Mommy…I heard that a *robot* solved the math problem you've been working on for your whole career!"[1]

As the journalist Joshua Rothman recently wrote:

"We have a real need to be needed. And yet many forces—thinking machines, aging, economic and social dislocation—appear to be making us feel redundant [if not irrelevant].

"Are we building a world in which no one is particularly necessary?"[2]

It's a question that the writer Sebastian Junger raised, 14 years ago, well before AI exploded on the scene. In his marvelous book, "Tribe." Junger recounts his time that he spent embedded with American soldiers at war, exploring the "mini-societies formed by soldiers in combat."

"In a unit at war, everyone lives together, experiences events as one, and contributes toward shared goals… 'individuals are assessed…by what they are willing to do for the group,' Junger writes.

"It can be difficult, therefore, for soldiers to return to a civilian existence in which 'most people work outside the home…families are isolated from wider communities, and personal gain almost completely eclipses collective good."

Junger concludes, in his book, that "humans don't mind hardship, in fact they thrive on it; what [we] mind," he says, "is not feeling necessary."[3]

---

[1] Joshua Rothman, "Do You Feel Needed?", *The New Yorker*, October 30, 2026.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Quoted from Rothman's article, and from Sebastain Junger, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, New York: Hachette Book Group, 2016.

******

All of which brings me to Commitment Sunday.
As I've told you before, it's one of my favorite Sundays of the year.

Why?

Because when I see each of you coming forward—
young and not as young,
financially fine and financially scared,
those who have been a part of Westminster all your life,
and those who have been members of Westminster
all of two months…

what goes through my mind are two words:
thank you!

Thank you not just for your pledge, but thank you for being a part of this faith community, thank you for following the Holy Spirit to this church.

Because every single one of you here, and all those who are joining us online…are necessary.

You matter to us.
And you matter to God.

You see, on the surface, Commitment Sunday is about finances.
About the number of people pledging.
About the amount that we're able to raise.

Last year, we set a new record for amount of money pledged.
This year, we're trying to break that record.

To cross the $3 million dollar mark in pledges
for the first time in Westminster's history.

Can we do it?
I believe, with God's help, we can do it!
It's why every pledge matters, and no pledge is too small.
That's Commitment Sunday, on the surface.

But below the surface…below the surface, Commitment Sunday isn't just about the gifts that we promise to give to God and God's Church.

Below the surface, Commitment Sunday is about the commitment that God has made to us. The promise that God will not only always be with us, but will provide us with our meaning in life,
with our value in life…

That in Jesus Christ, God has told us:
No matter what you're going through right now, you are necessary!

Have you ever seen a church live out that commitment?

In the church that I interned at in Denver, over 30 years ago, there was a large, extended family…they had all come from Lebanon and settled in the area a decade before.

They operated a Lebanese Restaurant in Denver.

It was kind of a bonus for the congregation, because every time a newborn in their large, extended family was baptized, they always brought huge plates of baklava—enough for the whole congregation—to celebrate the baptism.

But there was one time when they didn't do it.
It happened after my internship.
I didn't see it, but I heard about it.

The only time they didn't bring baklava for a family baptism was when Maria was born. The doctors told the family that she probably wouldn't survive. She was hospitalized for one week, then two, then a month—all in ICU.

Of course, the family took shifts being with Maria, never leaving her alone, never giving up hope, yet slowly coming to terms with where it looked like things were headed.

Finally, after ten months of this ordeal, the doctors told the family that Maria was stable enough to go home—if not to get better, at least to live the rest of her life outside the cold hospital confines.

It was then that the family approached the pastor, my former supervisor, and asked:

Could Maria be baptized?
Of course she could.

He and an elder could come to the hospital and do it there,
OR, my colleague and an elder
could come to Maria's home,
once she got there.

No, no, they said.
That's not what we want.
We want her baptized at Church.

Theologically, of course, they had it just right.
But how could they keep her safe?

The potential problems were numerous.

The risk of infection.

Plus, Maria was in a modified wheelchair with so many machines hooked up, it was hard to move her…

As it finally worked out, Maria was discharged from the Children's Hospital on Easter morning at 7am. The ambulance that was taking her home made a detour, stopping at the church, BEFORE all the Easter services were poised to commence.

And shortly after 7a, all the elders on Session— all in gowns and masks to protect Maria— they were there, waiting there at the church, to welcome Maria.

They were asked the baptismal question:

"Do we, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture Maria by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging her to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of Christ's church?"

And the elders said, "We do."

Surrounding her in a circle of love and faith and hope, Maria was baptized on Easter morning in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.[4]

******

Now…the water they used in that baptism…what was it?
Just water—ordinary tap water.

[4] As told by the Rev. Mark Ramsey in his sermon, "Five Baptisms," preached at Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church, Austin, Texas, January 8, 2017.

Is that what it was?
That's not it was.

For that family, it was living water, "a spring…gushing up to eternal life."

Jesus was there that day to give that family living water.
Just like Jesus gave the woman at the well living water.
Just like Jesus will do the same for you.

You don't know what form that living water will take.

When you make a commitment …
when you commit to teaching Sunday School,
when you commit to giving grace to a teenager
who is exasperating you,

when you volunteer your time for the Magi Market,
for Soteria, for Rebuild Upstate…

When you commit to giving back to God, and bring your pledge card forward today…you have no idea what God will do with your gift!

But make no mistake, God will transform it into living water.

Above the surface, below the surface,
in ways you and I may never get to see…
God will take your gift,
and God will say—
to someone who's really thirsty:
You are necessary.
Your life matters to me!

Amen.