Last week, we began a new series called “Thirst,” and throughout this series we’ll be trying to think about two things as we go to Scripture. First, we’ll consider how and why we have this innate longing for God, without whom if we’re honest with ourselves there’s always an uneasiness, a restlessness about us. Second, because we’re talking about a spiritual thirst, we’ll consider how this thirst for God can be supported practically by the church’s ministry. Because that’s what we’re here for, to be an agent, a conduit through which, to the glory of God, a gathering of broken, sinful people seek forgiveness and healing in the Lord. We’re supposed to be a place that embodies Augustine’s words in his great prayer from his Confessions, that we talked about last week and with which we’ll close in prayer today, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

And this week, we encounter someone who even though she was desperately seeking something, seeking the kind of rest Augustine wrote of, she still had every reason to be skeptical when she heard the Lord’s call. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

V. 7 reads, “A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink.’” And honestly, if v. 8 then read, “And then Jesus was slapped,” it would not surprise me. End of story.

The reason I think Jesus could have easily gotten himself slapped is because he was speaking a bit bluntly to a Samaritan. And Samaritans and Jews did not get along.

Imagine with me for a moment that one day, the neighborhood association here in Sequoyah Hills has this knock down drag out conflict—and this is just a metaphor, I’m not saying anything about the neighborhood association—but they split into two, and they decide it would be better to split the neighborhood. They make Kenesaw Avenue the dividing line, the road right outside, so there are now those on that side of Kenesaw and those on this side of Kenesaw. Used to all be the same neighborhood, but now it’s that side and this side.

Now, unlike real Knoxville, where there are a lot of churches, imagine that Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church was the only game in town. No other options. And when the neighborhood was all together, no problem. Folks would come from either side of Kenesaw to worship here. But once the neighborhood got split up, access for the folks on that side of Kenesaw to come here to worship was restricted to just Easter and Christmas. Maybe Mother’s Day. Other than that, they can’t come.

Some of you who live on that side of Kenesaw might say, “Well I’d just still come here.” But no, the neighborhood association is just too powerful. You’re stuck. You’re on that side of Kenesaw, and the church is on this side, and that’s that.

So, since they can’t come here, the folks on that side of Kenesaw might say, let’s start our own church over here, and they do.
Centuries past. The sides remain separated with two different churches. But while the churches were at first fairly similar, after a long time, things look different. So different, in fact, that if you were a part of this church, you might not think that church was right at all. That’s not just a different flavor, that’s a whole new thing, that’s beyond the pale, that’s it’s idolatry. We can’t be mixing with them.

Now, imagine that one day, a big powerful figure rises from the UT campus, let’s say Phil Fulmer, because no doubt he’d still be alive. And he decides, I’m taking over everything. And he summons the Vol Nation to take over the city and intends to make everyone to bow down to him as God incarnate. (This isn’t a knock on Phil Fulmer, it’s just a metaphor.) The folks on this side of Kenesaw say, “No way! We are faithful. We will resist.” So Phil Fulmer and the Vol Nation come on down from the UT campus, coming first to everyone that side of Kenesaw and says to them, “You with those folks? Because if you are, I’m going to destroy everything you own.” So the folks on that side of Kenesaw see Phil Fulmer’s army and say, “We ain’t with them. We renounce them!” Everyone on this side of Kenesaw don’t take kindly to it. Feels like betrayal, so after the Phil Fulmer threat subsides, the folks on this side of Kenesaw raise up their own militia, go over to that side of Kenesaw and start burning houses in retaliation, leaving much of what’s on that side of Kenesaw in ruins, and the people there just barely scraping by.

Imagine yourself on that side. You’d probably harbor some longstanding resentment to all those sanctimonious, vengeful hypocrites on this side. And if you were on this side, you’d probably harbor some longstanding resentment to all those blasphemous traitors on that side. You probably wouldn’t want anything to do with each other. Doesn’t matter that long ago it was all the same neighborhood. Folks on that side don’t mix with folks on this side.

Now, if you can imagine even a hint of the resentment that kind of division and history would cause, then you have some idea of the entrenched bitterness that existed between Jews and Samaritans.

And that’s a big deal, because in the passage we read a little bit ago, Jesus is going through Samaria. Samaritans are traced back to two of the tribes of Israel, but long ago the kingdom of Israel split in two, Israel to the north, Judah to the south, the Samaritans ended up in the north, and things started to change. Their worship started to change because access to the temple in Jerusalem in the south was limited. Later, when one Greek ruler came through, he threatened to annihilate the Samaritans if they didn’t renounce their connection with Judah, so they complied. After that, when the Judah got stronger, Judah retaliated and went through Samaria destroying towns and places of worship. You can call it a longstanding family feud, you can call it the Hatfields and McCoys, you can call it Pakistan and India, but Jews and Samaritans did not mix.

So with all of that backstory, Jesus is resting from his journey at a well in Samaria, ironically a well traced back to Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, and he encounters a Samaritan woman. And he, a Jew, says to this Samaritan, “Give me a drink.” Doesn’t ask. Just, “Give me a drink.” With all that simmering, entrenched bitterness between Jews and Samaritans, I think he’s lucky he didn’t get slapped.

The woman responds a bit more kindly than that. She says, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” But you have to understand, the Samaritans weren’t just waiting for Jews to be nice. The underlying assumption between them was hostility. So when Jesus kind of bluntly says, “Give me a drink,” the woman hears it, but her response is more like, “You got a lot of nerve, coming here, and telling me to give you a drink.”
Jesus doesn’t help himself with what he says next. In v. 10 he answers, “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.” This woman is far more patient than I would have been. Someone just comes up to me and essentially says, “Do you know who I am?” I’m likely to say, well, I’m not going to tell you what I’d be likely to say.

She’s skeptical. She questions where this living water would come from. Now again, at first reading, we might think that the woman is just struck and confused by what Jesus says, but I think we should read these words here, because of all the backstory, with a tone of, “Just who do you think you are?” I think there’s some hostility here. This woman has every reason to dismiss this strange, rude, presumptuous man, and she kind of does so.

But then Jesus says something else. In v. 13, he replies, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

And something changes. This woman, who had been understandably skeptical and even hostile, changes her tune. She says, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” She goes from looking at Jesus with probably thinly veiled contempt to eagerly asking Jesus for the very water he’s offering.

Why? She didn’t believe him at first. He didn’t perform some miracle. All he said was that everyone who drinks the well water would be thirsty again, but everyone who drank the living water he will give would never be thirsty. That all sounds nice, but why would Jesus’ saying that suddenly change this woman’s receptiveness?

It turns out that this woman is facing some hard times. First reason is the fact that she’s getting water from this well in the first place. You see, John tells us that she’s getting water from a well known as Jacob’s well, near the city of Sychar. The catch is, the well itself isn’t actually in the town, it’s about ¾ of a mile outside of it. The other thing is, just from the archaeological record, it’s likely that the town had a water source of its own that was in town, meaning, even though there was a water source in town, this woman instead trekked a mile and a half just to fill up a water jar. Why would she do that?

We also learn, as the exchange continues, that this woman had been married five times, and that the one she was with currently was not her husband. Doesn’t specify why she had been married five times, or why she wasn’t married a sixth time, but it would appear that one way or another, her standing in this town wasn’t good, and as a result, instead of getting water from the well in town, she is desperately resigned to lugging a water jar a mile and a half to get water at a well outside of town.

Imagine this woman’s life. First of all, women in that time were so socially vulnerable that there was an implicit pressure, just for the sake of protection, to be married. And she is married five times. We don’t know why there were five husbands, but regardless, the sixth man isn’t her husband, which means she’s vulnerable and probably ostracized. And so, every day, or every other day, to get something as simple as water, she can’t go around the corner; if she wants water to drink, she has to go out of town.

And so when Jesus says, “Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty,” all of a sudden he has said something that would be a gamechanger for her. The whole time she had been skeptical, or maybe even hostile to this man, but then he speaks precisely to the place of her desperation, a word of good news, and it’s like she’s stopped in her
tracks, and it all changes. “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

No doubt one part of it is that, even though on the surface it appears to be just a physical need, a need for water, it’s because Jesus is addressing a deeper, spiritual need. Sure the woman needs water, but it’s the deeper, spiritual question that grabs her attention.

About ten years ago, two books came out about poverty and churches’ approach to poverty. One book is titled *When Helping Hurts* and the other is *Toxic Charity*. You can pretty much tell from the titles what kind of points they’re making, but they’re pretty indicting about how churches, especially in the US, have gone about “helping” the poor. Even though there are good intentions, all too often the efforts actually do long-term harm, and the reason for it is because, these books argue, churches often do not embrace a spiritual approach to poverty, instead seeing poverty primarily in terms of a material lack. For example, if poverty is merely just lacking things like food or clothing or shelter or money, then the solution is simple: provide food, clothing, shelter, and money. No more poverty.

But efforts to do precisely that have proven frustratingly ineffective. And the reason, these books argue, is because churches often don’t try to address the sort of renewal and healing that addresses the whole person, the underlying spiritual needs of dignity and love and empowerment. Why? It’s easier just to give away some clothes.

Now that’s not to say churches shouldn’t be generous. We absolutely should. If there is need, the church should be on the forefront. The church should be neck deep in efforts throughout a city and region and world to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, in precisely the sort of outreach Donna described earlier at the beginning of our service. But we should also hope to serve and connect with the whole person, not just a lack. Because if we think that merely giving food or clothes or sickness will truly address the deeper needs of the soul, we will always be frustrated, because it’s not getting to the root issue. It’s not getting to the root issue for those the church serves; it’s not getting to the root issue for the church. We will always find ourselves coming back to the well.

And Jesus offers far more than a stop gap. And the fact that he was offering something far more was the reason this woman started listening, because it was finally a word that spoke to what her true desperation, her true longing, her true thirst was.

Friends, no doubt for some of us here, we have our reasons to be skeptical or even hostile to the invitation to share in this “living water.” Like the woman at the well, we might have longstanding, historical reasons to doubt the invitation to come and drink. There might be painful, personal reasons, feelings of shame in what we’ve done, feelings of anger at what others have done, feelings of despair at what looks to be utter hopelessness of anything changing, all of which might make us hear this invitation to “living water” and think, “yeah right.”

But try as we may, we can never escape that thirst, that longing, and no matter how much pain we’ve endured, no matter how many scars have been inflicted on us, it still doesn’t change the fact that in the depths of our own desperation, the Lord speaks good news: “Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.”

And so I invite you, friends, whatever reasons you may have to hold off this promise this invitation out at arm’s length, good reasons though they may be, hear the Lord when he says that all the things you are using to try to fill whatever void, whatever longing is in your heart, you will keep coming back to that well, over and over. Your heart will indeed be restless until it finds its rest in the Lord. And hear instead a promise of living water, water that will spring up within you, and up to eternal life. Let us pray together.