

“What We Can Ask For”
Sermon from John 4:3-10
Given Sunday, July 26, 2020
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
Reverend Erika Marksbury, Senior Pastor

Jesus left Judea to return to Galilee. This meant he had to pass through Samaria. He stopped at Sychar, a town in Samaria, near the tract of land Jacob had given to his son Joseph, and Jacob’s well was there. Jesus, weary from the journey, came and sat by the well. It was around noon.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” The disciples had gone off to the town to buy provisions. The Samaritan woman replied, “You’re a Jew. How can you ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink?” - since Jews had nothing to do with Samaritans.

Jesus answered, “If only you recognized God’s gift, and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him for a drink instead, and he would have given you living water.”

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What is the world you want? What is the town, the state, the country, the world you imagine, when we pray for God’s kingdom to come on earth?

What is the change we need, so that we all might flourish? Could you name it?

Cecelia Flores can. Maybe you’ve heard or seen her name it; maybe you’ve been part of her movement to do just that. She’s eighteen years old; a Mexican-American who just graduated from Mac High

and plans to attend Linfield this fall. She was the organizing force behind the student-led protest for Black Lives Matter in front of the library and police station last month, and she's part of the effort for ongoing actions here in town. She was interviewed for a blog called "The Life I Want," and she described the mixed reaction here in town to that protest – the thumbs up and the honking and the signs of support, the other fingers up and the revving engines and the people who yelled insults as they drove by.

The interviewer asked her, "What do you wish for McMinnville out of this?" She said, "My first goal was: McMinnville needs to wake up and look at what's going on around the world and around the country. And now people are forced to talk about it. So now I want accountability here in McMinnville. I want people to be called out when they are being racist or when they are being inconsiderate or bigots. That's what needs to happen next here in order for real change to happen."

I think Jesus is naming the kind of change we need, too, in our scripture for today. He's maybe more subtle, but it's clear he's asking the woman at the well for more than a drink of water. I think he's asking her for a better world.

He says to her, "Give me a drink."

And she says, "You're a Jew, and I'm a Samaritan. How can you ask me that?"

And he says, "If you knew God's gift..." Some versions have him saying, "If you knew the generosity of God..."

Essentially, he's saying, "Let's make the world anew."

And she's saying, "We've got all this history. How is it even possible to make the world anew?"

And he says, "Trust me. The force that is the creative, loving power behind the whole world is with us in this."

The conversation reminds me of the argument that Ibram X. Kendi makes in his book "How to Be an Antiracist," the adult version of the board book Sean read this morning. Kendi tells us that hearts and minds don't shape policy, like we might typically think, but just the opposite – policy shapes hearts and minds. Racist policy shapes racist thinking. To undo it, to dismantle it, we don't begin by trying

to change hearts and minds, we begin by identifying racist policy, and rewriting it in ways that bring about equity and justice.

It's like the woman telling Jesus, "Don't you remember – your people and my people are not friendly. We do not share things. There are centuries of mistrust and ill treatment between us. How can we overcome that?"

And Jesus responding, "Maybe that's not where we start. Maybe we start small. I am thirsty. You have water. Maybe we start there, and then we talk about how I can share what I have. And we build from that recognition of each other's need, and the sharing we can do to meet it."

First, quench the thirst. First, meet the immediate, practical need. That's within the realm of possibility; that's within our capability. Hearts and minds take longer. But you know, maybe not as long, once we recognize that we're all thirsty.

From her 16th-century Spanish convent, Teresa of Avila wrote to her sisters about her visions of the soul, a collection of ideas that ended up being titled "The Interior Castle," since she imagined the soul as a home with many rooms, and the spiritual journey as a movement

through those many rooms, always towards the center, where God dwells. We're exploring her writings this summer, and discovering that there are joys and struggles along the way of the soul's journey, and each room – each dwelling place, as she calls it – has its own gifts and challenges.

We're in the fifth dwelling place today – she has more to say about these later rooms, the ones closer to the center – so we're still in the fifth dwelling place today and here, she offers this statement that's part promise, part advice. She writes, "Since in some way we can enjoy heaven on earth, be brave in begging the Lord to give us this grace in such a way that nothing will be lacking through our own fault; that God may show us the way and strengthen the soul until it finds this hidden treasure. The truth is that the treasure lies within our very selves."

"In some way, we can enjoy heaven on earth..." she writes, so be bold in asking for it. Be brave in begging for that grace. The potential of remaking the world lies within us.

What would need to happen for heaven on earth to be a reality?
What would need to shift for God's will to be done here? What would have to change in order for those who mourn to be

comforted, for the poor to claim the kingdom of God, for the meek to inherit the earth?

Imagine a world where divisions are healed as we teach history honestly and dream a future together, as confessions are made and heard, as reparations are offered as a beginning step towards justice. Imagine an America where peacemakers are praised, instead of shot with rubber bullets. Imagine a Portland where those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – instead of being teargassed or snatched off the street without warning and without cause – are seen and heard as witnesses of a gospel that can remake the world for the good.

What is the world you want? Be bold in asking, Teresa tells her sisters. Be brave in begging.

Her writing is about the soul but her work is in the world. There isn't a contradiction, for Teresa, between the journey the soul goes on to come into union with God and the journey a society goes on to shape itself into a place where all God's people can thrive. This is the generosity of God that Jesus tells the woman about, its source and inspiration is God but it begins within each of us – it begins with our asking ourselves what might be possible. And if the answer is

anything – if what might be possible is a thriving world, if that’s the heaven that can be here – if we really believe that love and liberation are what God intended at creation and what Jesus came to proclaim and what the Spirit is moving within us to empower – then there’s nothing we can’t ask for.

I’d invite you to grab your paper and your writing utensil, and to spend the next few minutes imagining that world, and writing or sketching about the questions that might get us closer to it.

Consider: What’s something you could ask for that would change the world – or that would change your world? Who does that question go to? Like, is it a question for your own soul? A question for God? A question for City Councilors, or County Commissioners? A question for a friend or a loved one? Take some time – sketch or make notes or imagine – and see where your dreaming takes you...