

WORSHIP THAT COMES WITH A WARNING LABEL:

## **Worship For Thirsty Souls**

**John 4:7-26**

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**LISTEN:** <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/worship-that-comes-with-a-warning-label-worship-for-thirsty-souls/>

Elie Wiesel was a survivor of the Nazi death camps. He wrote movingly about the death march, as Nazis frantically moved Jewish captives from camp to camp, attempting to avoid the advancing Allied troops at the end of WWII. He tells about those prisoners being so thirsty they would grab the snow off of the shoulder of the person in front of them in the march. Water is one of the most basic human needs. We can live a long time without food (so they tell me), but not nearly as long without water. Water is such an apt analogy for the thirst of our souls--for God, for authentic worship. Humans are incurably religious. Jesus and the Samaritan woman had a great discussion about her soul thirst--and about worship.

These two works of art depict this famous encounter between Jesus and the woman. Interesting that the first picture is fairly traditional. I like the second one, showing the dark circles under her eyes. She has lived with abuse and exclusion. She seems to be weary...and wary.

The Samaritan woman is excluded because she is divorced and now living with someone not her husband (and before you judge, remember that in Jesus' day, women could be discarded like used soda cans). She is also excluded because she is a Samaritan. When Jews who were not exported during the Exile intermarried with their pagan conquerors, Samaritans came into being. Different race, and a different place of worship and probably a different kind of worship.

Do you know what I've found amazing as I have explored worship? The way we worship says so much about who is welcome and who is not. If you are still wondering why three years ago, we added a praise and worship service at 10:45am, this is your answer. Because using the language and songs of insiders, many unchurched folks don't understand it and feel excluded.

My vision for FBC JC is that we become a place where people are free to engage in written litany or to shout amen and raise their hands. Free to enjoy the music of Bach or Rock. Free to light candles or light up the place with loud guitars. I guess my vision is that we become Baptist-costal, or Episco-Baptist, or putting it together, Episco-Bapti-Holy Roller. But it's not just worship tastes. It's also lifestyles--any person, from any lifestyle is welcome to worship here, as just as Jesus invited the woman at the well to worship. Jesus makes it clear. Worship is for connecting, not dividing! Worship is not for creating barriers but blessings!

Jesus makes clear in vv. 21-24 that it's not where we worship. It's the who and how questions that matter. Here's a thought. Maybe arguing over worship is a convenient way to keep God at

a distance, a diversion to keep us from experiencing the terror of worship (remember--it should come with a warning label!).

And note we are to worship in spirit and truth, twice mentioned. Not just truth. Our faith is always in danger of being too cerebral, too intellectual. It's spirit and truth. After the renowned Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel had experienced a near-fatal heart attack, he reflected on his life. He told someone, "I have never asked God for wisdom, success, power or fame. I asked God for wonder! And He gave it to me!" Wonder. [*Ragamuffin Gospel*, by Bernard Manning, p. 89]. Richard Rohr reminds us that the idea of God is not the same thing as God's presence. Encountering the idea of something/someone is different from encountering the thing/person. "Presence" is a way of knowing which leaves us NOT in control, leaves us vulnerable, as it did the Samaritan woman.

Furthermore, notice that worship is our response to God's gift of God's Self to us. What's more, God the Father continually seeks us in worship. I love this image! God isn't sitting passively on the throne in some far off heaven, enjoying what is brought to Him. God continues to come after us in worship, with extravagant love. And the promise of Jesus is, "The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life" (v. 14, *The Message*).

A pastor shares this story: A stranger began showing up for church. He would often be drunk and would sit near the back, slipping out before the benediction, avoiding everyone. But over the months, he began to change--on the inside and outside. He discovered his thirst for God was greater than his thirst for the bottle. Finally, he began to take part in the greeting time during services. Two years went by. Church became his family. He served on key church planning groups, particularly related to faith-sharing and care in the community. When his friends asked him what happened, why the change, he simply replied, "I fell in love with God."