

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

## FREE WATER!

John 4:1-15; Richard Johnson Funeral; September 12, 2024

In our Old Testament Reading from Numbers twenty (20:1-15), the whole host of Israel on their Exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land were in trouble: **“Now there was no water for the congregation [to drink].”** How did the people respond to their great thirst? They complained to Moses and Aaron that they had been led out into the wilderness to die; they claimed they would have been better off if they had stayed slaves in Egypt. At least they wouldn’t die of thirst. What could Moses do about this? He had no water. What would you have suggested Moses do if you were in his spot? Call out: “Hey, Culligan man!” Richard could have been a big help if he had been around then, but he wasn’t.

So Moses took this problem to God, who told him to take his staff to a large rock in front of the people and tell the rock to produce water. At different time when the people were thirsty God had commanded Moses to strike a rock to make water come out from it (Ex 17:1-7). This time Moses was told by God to speak to the rock. Whatever was going on with Moses then, whether he was angry, upset, or just impatient, he did not obey God’s command. **“Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock.”**

God still gave life-saving water to drink, but Moses suffered a negative consequence. God told him, **“Because you did not believe in Me, to uphold Me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.”** God barred Moses from entering the Promised Land for not honoring God as holy, not believing what God told him. Some people find this an excessively harsh punishment by God. “Tell the rock to give water versus strike the rock, what’s the big deal? The people got their water of life in the end, didn’t they?” If Moses would have been able to just cry out to Richard, “Hey, Culligan man!” there would have been millions more satisfied customers and it would have worked out fine for everyone.

For decades Richard worked to satisfy his Culligan Water customers, but God is not in the water-selling business.

Moving on to our Gospel Reading from John four, we heard about the time Jesus asked a woman at the well for a drink of water but ended up offering that woman **living water** to drink. Jesus made some amazing claims about His water in comparison to the water from the well. **“Everyone who drinks of this water [from the well] will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever.”** If you are in the water-selling business, Jesus’ words should make you squirm. It doesn’t matter how much water we drink; eventually everyone gets thirsty again. It’s the perfect business to be in! But if people drink Jesus’ water, they will never be thirsty ever again. The water-selling business will be ruined! On top of all this, Jesus’ water is free! No one will pay for water if they can get free water, and that water will keep them from getting thirsty! (Don’t worry, Richie. Jesus hasn’t gone into competition with you to steal your customers and put you out of business.)

While God created humans with an essential need for water, meaning we can’t make our own water so we need to get it from another source in order to live, that water God provides in natural ways. The **living water** Jesus gives is supernatural, of which He says to the one who drinks it, **“The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”** The woman at the well Jesus spoke to about this could only imagine natural water like from the well and the relief from having to go there, draw it up, and haul it home. (They didn’t have Culligan home delivery in those days.)

What is this **living water** that Jesus had for her, and for us? What does it mean that it quenches our thirst forever and wells up to eternal life? Most importantly for today, did Richard drink this water so he has eternal life?

Later when Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Jewish feast of Booths, commemorating how they had lived in tents while on the Exodus until they reached the Promised Land, He cried out: **“If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink”** (Jn 7:37b). To drink living water is to believe in Jesus as your Savior. Richard believed in Jesus and was baptized into God’s family already as an infant. Holy Baptism connected Richard to the saving work of Jesus.

All four Gospels describe how Jesus died on the cross to save and forgive us, but only John's says that the Roman soldier pierced Jesus' side with a spear and out came blood and water, the **blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world** and the **living water that wells up in us to eternal life**. To drink this living water we need to have faith in Jesus, that He is God's Son who came into this world to suffer and die for our sins and rise to give us new life. It is a great comfort for us today that Richard had this faith as a baptized child of God and **living water that wells up in us to eternal life**.

Many people wonder what eternal life will be like. Since you and I have no personal experience with what it be like in heaven with God, we need to rely on what God's Word says. We are familiar with what life and death are like on this earth. We witnessed what age and illness, weakness and injury did to Richard, but what did God prepare for him in heaven? These Words from the Revelation of St. John are helpful. They are a description of what God promised Richard and all Christians in heaven:

**“They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;  
the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.  
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their Shepherd,  
and He will guide them to springs of living water,  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes”** (7:16-17).

The role God gave Richard in this world has ended. The Culligan Man does not need to bring water to anyone because no one is thirsty in heaven. He's been put out of business by the Lamb of God, his Good Shepherd, who guides him to springs of living water from which he drinks, never to thirst anymore, water which promises that he will rise from the dead in his body like Jesus did to live forever.

Richard's children described him as “the rock” of their family. He showed them how to love a spouse, the love of his life since “Shirely O” was his high school sweetheart. You waited for him to get home to pray together before you ate supper. He got you up to go to church at the early service no matter how late you got in the night before because he wanted you to have the same faith in and love for God His Savior. His love for you all was solid as a rock.

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Richard was the rock of your family, but Richards' Rock was Jesus, as we sing in the hymn:

*Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in Thee;  
Let the water and the blood,  
From Thy riven side which flowed,  
Be of sin the double cure:  
Cleanse me from its guilt and pow'r. (LSB 761.1)*

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Now, I'm not so sure about the claim in Richard's obituary that soft water falls as rain on the earth because the Culligan Man has made it to heaven, though it is a nice sentiment and a confession of God's saving work in Jesus for Richard.

The water we need today is what Jesus has for us to drink, and it's free to us, like the Culligan bottled water waiting for us downstairs after the Service. Jesus reminds us about natural water: **"Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."** That's the water we need to drink by faith in Jesus in this earthly life so we can join Richard in drinking from the river of life in heaven.

In Jesus' name. Amen.