

Having lived through the survival show craze of the early 2000s, I've developed a working base knowledge of survival skills – at least theoretical knowledge.

Shows like *Survivor* and *Man vs. Wild* were incredibly popular in the early 2000s. They pitted man against nature. One man would be thrown into a survival situation and the whole show was watching him survive.

I spent a lot more of my life watching those shows than I should have. But at least I feel like I learned a thing or two about survival. It is a base knowledge that might come in handy if I ever find myself trapped on a deserted island or the lone survivor of a plane crash in the middle of Alaska... or maybe not.

But I'll tell you what, if nothing else, this base survival knowledge came in handy for this sermon.

A tip for you: if you ever find yourself stranded on the open ocean, don't drink the water. The salty ocean water may feel cool and refreshing to a parched throat, but far from helping, it actually makes matters worse. The salt in ocean water speeds up the dehydration process and makes your thirst worse.

Ok, maybe you don't need hours of survival show watching to know that. But that basic survival skill works well as a general metaphor for this sermon.

Have you ever felt like you were guzzling saltwater? Have you ever faced a problem in life (or felt a void in life) and you tried to fix that problem (or fill that void) only to find out that your solution was like saltwater to a thirsty survivor – it didn't fix the problem but made it worse?

Have you ever felt like you were drinking saltwater? You were chasing after something in the hope that it would satisfy you only to be left unsatisfied and maybe even more thirsty than you were before?

I imagine that's exactly how that woman felt in John 4. She would have identified with that feeling of being thirsty, but no matter how much she drank, the thirst was never satisfied for long. In fact, it only seemed to make things worse.

Jesus himself used the metaphor. He saw a woman chasing satisfaction for her thirst in things that could never satisfy and so he offered her water that would permanently satisfy her thirst.

It was noon, and that simple fact tells us that this woman's quest for satisfaction was already legendary in the small town of Sychar. In a hot climate like Israel, you didn't go to draw water at noon, you went first thing in the morning or later in the evening, in the cool of the day.

But not this woman. She knew that in a small town like Sychar, everyone knows your name, they also know all the skeletons in your closet. And there are skeletons in every closet, but some people find out through the looks they get, the coldness of shoulders turned away, the whispers behind the back; some people find out that not all skeletons are created equal.

Maybe the first time she got divorced that was a skeleton the people of Sychar could understand. Sometimes things just don't work out between people. After the second divorce, maybe people began to raise the old eyebrow a bit. When she burned through a third husband, then the rumor mill really kicked into high gear. People were shaking their heads behind closed doors when they heard she was getting married to husband number four. And she became the kind of woman who caused mothers to usher their kids to the other side of the street by the time marriage number five fell apart.

And so she came to the well at noon – because not all skeletons are created equal. She came a thirsty woman – physically thirsty, but also emotionally thirsty and the water at the bottom of that well would be able to satisfy the physical, but the emotional thirst... she'd been guzzling saltwater for a while for that.

But, little did she know that her world was about to be turned upside down.

She comes at noon and runs into a man, a man from out of town (based on his look and the slightly different accent he had), a man who apparently didn't know about all the skeletons, because he talks to her, and he not only talks to her, he asks for a drink. And then he starts talking about some kind of living water that would make it so she would never thirst again. She's interested. This might just be her lucky day where a stranger who didn't know her past would give her something that would make her life better.

But then the conversation turned. The simple enough sounding request must have felt like a punch in the gut: **“Go, call your husband and come back.”**

Ok, well, he still doesn't know, and he doesn't need to know... **“I have no husband.”**

“You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you have now is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

Here she thought it was her lucky day because she had run into a man who didn't know her history, but it turns out she had run into the one man who knew everything about her – including the saltwater she had been guzzling. In her quest for satisfaction, this woman had run to that oft-used well of human love and relationship. The problem was, of course, that far from making her life better, the more of this saltwater she drank the worse her life got (she had run a few too many times to this particular well, just ask anyone in town), but she couldn't seem to stop herself.

The good news for this woman was that this man didn't drag out her skeletons just to demean and humiliate her (like so many in her small town). This man had a different purpose in mind: true satisfaction, not humiliation was the object of this stranger at the well. He wanted to offer her true satisfaction and the first step was to rip that glass of saltwater out of her hands and dump it out.

Which leads me to the tough part of this sermon: What would Jesus have sent you to get? What is the saltwater you have been guzzling?

You don't have to have a string of failed marriages to be guilty of drinking saltwater. Saltwater is anything you run to for satisfaction, other than God.

So, take me for example.

If I were to walk past you after church today and as I walk past I hear you whisper to the person next to you, “Hey, did you know that Pastor Hoff is really bad at taking care of his car? I bet he doesn’t know the difference between a shock, a strut, and a brake pad.”

If you said that, I wouldn’t really care. It’s maybe a bit exaggerated, but never in my life have I considered myself a “car guy”. My car is not what Jesus would ask me to run into town to get. Cars are not my saltwater – it’s not the thing I’m relying on to satisfy my deep desires in life.

But if when I walked past, you whispered, “Man, Pastor Hoff really botched that sermon today. He wouldn’t know a good Law/Gospel sermon if it jumped up and bit him on the backside.”

If you said that, then I’m going to care. That’s going to sting. That’s going to ruin my day. I’ll get defensive. I’ll get moody. Because my reputation as a pastor and preacher *is* something that Jesus could ask me to go and get.

Saltwater is not always necessarily bad thing things (like a string of five divorces). Often the saltwater I guzzle are good things that I rely on to satisfy me in ways that only God can satisfy. So, my longing to feel important, to feel like my life matters, I don’t only rely on God and his Word to satisfy that deep desire. I love to guzzle the praise I get as a preacher and pastor – which is saltwater. It never fully satisfies, in fact, to the degree that it draws my attention away from Jesus onto myself, it makes things worse.

And that’s just one example from my life. There’s plenty more.

What would Jesus have sent you to get?

Maybe it’s your car, your family, the diplomas hanging on your wall, or your straight-A report card; maybe it’s your checkbook and the balance that brings you feelings of security or despair, or your calendar filled with events for yourself or your kids; maybe it’s the few drinks you need after work every night to settle down, or the string of drama-filled, passionate, but short-lived relationships from your past.

Hidden all around our proverbial houses are glasses of saltwater and our Jesus wants us to bring them to him and dump them out in front of him.

And just like that woman, he doesn’t do it because he wants to humiliate us. He does it because he wants to satisfy our thirst and his first step is to get us to stop guzzling saltwater.

But you know what happens next; what happens after Jesus drags the skeletons out of our closets... sometimes we react just like the woman in John 4.

Just think about the roller coaster of this conversation: she starts with hope (maybe this guy doesn’t know my history, and he’s offering some pretty special water), and then things get real uncomfortable and real awkward (he knew everything about her). Her go-to move is to try and change the subject, to deflect attention away from herself because things are getting too real between her and Jesus.

So, she brings up where we should worship, which is like the ancient equivalent of whether healthcare should be a universal right controlled by the government or not. It was a hot-button issue meant to change the incredibly uncomfortable path of the conversation.

And maybe that’s a go-to move for you too. For me, when Jesus tells me to go and get my thing, it is easy for me to change the subject. It often happens when Jesus points out one of my flaws (either in personal Bible reading or listening to a sermon) and instead of applying it to myself I think of all the other people in my life who really need to be hearing this right now. I think about how they really need to dump out their saltwater but never really get around to dumping out my own glass.

Ah, but Jesus isn’t so easily distracted.

This woman tries to distract, but Jesus’ answer: The time is coming and has now come. The time is now to put aside distractions. The time is now to stop chasing after satisfaction in saltwater. The time is now to stop trying to deflect from your relationship with God and a tough conversation about the things that are getting in the way of your relationship with God. The time is now to worship God in the Spirit and in truth.

No more distractions. No more delay. Dump that saltwater out and find in your God the satisfaction your spirit desperately needs.

The woman tries one last time: “This conversation got real fast, this is a lot to process, this is a lot being asked of me by some stranger I just met at a well. When the Messiah comes, he’ll straighten all this out.”

Jesus, one more time: “No, the time is now. I am the Messiah.”

And here, in Jesus’ refusal to be distracted, is the good news.

When that woman went to that well that day, she had no idea that she her life was about to be turned upside down. She was about to be grabbed ahold of by her Savior who would refuse to let go until she knew who he was and what he was offering her. He would not stop, no matter how real and uncomfortable the conversation got. He would not be distracted from his goal: making this woman see that he was the Messiah; making this woman see that what he was offering her was pure, fresh water that could quench her thirst like nothing else could – because it was the pure water of love and forgiveness pouring forth from the heart of her God.

She had no idea that she was about to come face to face with her Savior, but she did, because he sought her out and he refused to let her go.

And friends, that same Jesus has set his sights on you. In his way, in his time, he grabs ahold of you through his word and he will not let you go until he you realize who he is and what he’s offering you. He won’t stop rooting around your house looking for

glasses of saltwater that need to be dumped out. He won't be distracted from his goal, and he won't stop teaching your heart to crave pure, spiritual water.

This is why he came; for this woman at that well, for you and for me. He came to be our Messiah – the one who would save us from ourselves – from our deadly thirst and all the saltwater we pour down our throats.

And when this Messiah moved on from Sychar to his cross, when blood and water flowed out of the spear wound in his side he provided the living water of forgiveness and mercy.

This same Jesus has set his sights on you. He sees your thirst. He will do whatever it takes to give you living water, so that you never thirst again. And he won't stop until he gets you safely through this life to the eternal life he has prepared and earned for you.

So, drink deep friends.

Amen.