

# Watering Holes and Encounters of the Loving Kind

Ron Fraser's Aug 2008 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Presentation



In early May every year growing up we would receive a note from Pine Lake Camp Christian giving us information about the camping

schedule. I didn't get a lot of personal mail, so I always looked forward to it. The information always had a "Check list" for what to bring to Camp:

Bed roll and pillow, Bible, pencil and notebook, toothpaste, soap and towel, flashlight, raincoat, ball glove, expectation for a good time.

There was also a note about what to leave behind:

transistor radios, selfish attitudes.

It was rather minimalist. You could get the bare essentials for camping in the 1950's into a grocery bag! Dare we imagine the possibility of "minimalist requirements" a life transforming camping experience in the 21<sup>st</sup> C?

I loved camp, and still do. Growing up, I endured winter for camp. I counted the days for camp to begin, and lived in the memory of it. This summer we spent a week of our holidays at 2VM Bible Camp in the BC interior, where we spent numerous holidays as our boys were growing up. They always looked forward to our times too. Christian camping has made its mark on me, as it has on our family.

When we moved a year ago, I came across a box of memorabilia. Stopping to study the Friendship Logs that were part of that collection, I still remembered and recognized most of the names. Some have passed on, some have dropped by the way, but many are

still part of our lives, friendships forged on the anvil of common experience of Christian camping. There were the experiences of lumpy porridge and water that didn't always agree with us, those of blowing our lungs out with group cheers, and competing for 80,000 points for the neatest cabin, and skits and cabin hijinks after "lights out" and early morning fishing trips on a sea of glass, that has bonded us forever. But it was not just the friendships that drew me like a magnet.

It wasn't just for the teaching either, which was substantial. As a nine year old, I learned the books of the New Testament one camp, sitting in a boat! Bible stories were made so real we were right in them! I remember Jesus walking on water (a submerged boat), and I remember Him washing our feet, and inviting us to wash others. I remember Mt. Carmel, with real fire coming down (a string) to light a pile of water soaked logs (thanks to gasoline). In later teen years there were classes on "How to Lead," "Christian Dating," and "How to Share your Faith," along with stories from Christian history.

One year there was a class on "Spiritual Giants." That class proved that learning is not just about the intended curriculum but "the surplus one," the one that takes place after the classroom. I remember going home from camp and reading a short passage from *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis, everyday for the rest of the summer. I still have some of his quotes under the glass on my desk:

*"God will never lead you where His grace cannot keep you."*

*"Man proposes but God disposes."*

*"The path of love and hope is marked by submission to Jesus."*

Programmed well, Christian camping

incites spiritual imagination that changes life forever. Good curriculum always holds the possibility of "surplus," pushing back the edges of what we think life is, and especially what we think life in Christ is. I didn't always understand a Kempis, but that's what makes the truth of his experience of the faith so profound: he reconfigured life for me even as teenager.

Earlier, Jean Miles who served for years as a Junior Camp Dean, taught us the amazing lense of silence, of walking with God in a morning prayer walk. As we all sat still, looking out over that sea of glass I can still hear her voice from behind us: "Be still.....Know that I am God." God afterall, was never intended to be "figured out" and captured in our statements, but loved in our lives! At a Junior High Camp, I committed my life to Christ. At a later one I learned the lense of communicating love through prayer, as Ron Pelham, then minister of the Vulcan Church of Christ, imparted the gift of conversational prayer to a cabin full of 14 year old guys, learning that God already knew what we wanted for each other, we just had to invite Him to the party. I will never forget the impact of Rick Rehn prayer: "Thank you Lord for Ron, for who you made him to be." Rick has been chair of the Board of ABC during one of the most prolific decades in her history. I think part of the reason we have worked so well together, is the basic friendship and genuine regard laid four decades ago. As a 33 year old still trying to figure out what I'd be when I grew up, one night as several of us sat around exequeting campfire embers, someone commented: "I need to remember that the coals don't manage fire, but fire manages the coals." Worth remembering in the presence of big decisions: when we surrender control to our Lord Jesus, He at last has a chance.

So important was this spiritual feeding that drew me like a magnet to Christian camping, that some camps disappointed me. I think I was 16, when I went to a camp where the counselors were more interested in having a good time than leading kids closer to Jesus, a camp with lots of recreation, and parties, but little Christian input. That camp was spiritual desert for me. At the end my light was a faint flicker...and I was desperate! When I came home I talked my folks into letting me go Grande Prairie Family Camp. It was the middle of hay-ing season, so it took some talking! My desperation was well placed, as God used that camp powerfully in a decision to dedicate my life to vocational ministry. It's probably worth remembering that the opportunity to help kids find the God who is so passionately seeking them, is fragile. It doesn't exist just because we have a facilities, a week of camp, and good recreation. There are no entitlements in Christian camping. To lead people to the love that ultimately matter in life, it takes leaders who are on that quest themselves. Christian camping I have come to see, as a place of invitation to *disorient our lives from the things that we think matter, to let go of them, to disconnect from them, and to seek eternal things and the only love that matters.*

This invitation to disorientation, is as old as faith itself. That is, the quest for faith and love in a world that denies the former and struggles desperately to find the latter, is both well established and ongoing. While Christian camping in its current form only goes back to the late 1800's, it is part of the life of God's people that goes back at least 4000 years.

Discovering love while hanging out around water has a long tradition. One of the greatest love stories in all literature is found in Genesis 29. It's the story of a young man named Jacob and the beautiful Rachel. Jacob had run away from home because his brother

wants to kill him for cheating him out of his inheritance. He comes to a well and he's very thirsty. It's mid afternoon. He looks over under a tree to see a flock of sheep, bedded down, panting in the scorching heat. And then he sees her. His heart skips a beat as he catches his own breath! Before him is ravishing beauty! There is more than a spark here! He is smitten by love! After he collects himself, he rolls away a stone that covers the well for her to water her father's flock. Then the text says, "Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud." Wow! You can almost miss it. Kisses can be pretty mundane...unless it's the love of your life... "Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud." Jacob wants to marry her, but his uncle requires 7 years of labor for her hand. And you remember the story of uncle Laban's deceit: what is to be the most beautiful day of Jacob's life, he ends up with Rachel's sister Leah, who had neither a sparkle in her eyes, nor drew Jacob's sparkle. Jacob is undeterred...I said smitten...and so he works 7 more years for Rachel's hand. A 14 year detour...talk about disorienting!!! They marry and have twelve kids that become the 12 tribes of Israel.

Scroll forward 1900 to 2000 years. Same well. Same heat of the afternoon. It's another love story, with all kinds of paradoxical twists. And instead of love that transcends a broken promise, its love that transcends twisted taboos, and prejudices that imprison people. Some of those prejudices are actually foisted upon the text itself with fanciful interpretations. Evangelicals tend to paint the woman at the well (John 4) with bright fingernails, dark mascara, and a short skirt...the "brighter," "darker," and "shorter" the better... apparently to magnify the power of the converting word. A woman whose former life that testifies to looseness, becomes after a single encounter with Jesus, the first spear point of witness to the Kingdom of God, outside of Judaism. Critics of institutional religion who find all church

people empty, all thieves generous, all drunks loveable, and all hookers deeply spiritual, see the woman at the well as the most open and honest person of all, trying to survive in a hypocritical town that makes drawing water in the heat of the afternoon a necessity. And moralizers paint her as dangerous: beware her mincing, seductive walk, her eyes waiting in ambush.

But she's none of these things. *To Jesus she's a person*, yes, married 5 times, now with someone who is not her husband. But we don't know any further details of her life and certainly none that would cause Jesus to urge her to repent. Perhaps it is the transparency of her life, that redeems its moments.

Whether she is morally suspect, or a moral hero, is not what captures Jesus in this love affair of a different sort. And what unfolds is the longest recorded conversation he has with anyone that we know about. On many counts it's amazing that it took place at all: a man and women in public; a Jew conversing with a Samaritan; a transcendent talking to a resident; one offering living water, and the other caught up in the endless afternoon chores of drawing water that doesn't satisfy. But it did take place.

The conversation begins with Jesus: "Would you mind drawing me a drink of water?" and from that simple conversation about the present conditions of life around a well and thirst, about the possibilities of living water that quenches thirst forever, there emerges this amazing conversation about worship and relationship, about how neither are defined geographically. The time is when those who worship, won't look to Jerusalem or Mt. Gerazim, *"but will worship in spirit and truth."*

The refusal of Jesus to debate the theological abstractions around her questions are profoundly disorienting to the woman. Disorientation was a threat to her security and vision of life, as to ours, which is what makes it such an

incredible gift for our journey of faith. For the moment we have everything figured out, faith is no long even a part of the game. **Disorientation is what makes this a love story.** *You are loved when someone knows you as you are and not as you pretend to be, and still sees your life in terms of its eternal, ultimate value. You are loved when someone looks past the past that you know well enough to have embraced it in its utter ugliness and reality, and still say, I love you.*

At this place of profound orientation, Jacob's well, known to the patriarchs, to every one of her Samaritan neighbors and to her as a centering source of life, Jesus dares to offer Himself, not as a new center of life, but as *life itself, walking, talking, listening creatively, offering, extending this invitation to life, to all people, male and female, Samaritan and Jew.* **She yearns for living water. He offers Himself.**

What's so exciting about this love story is its sheer intimacy: **Jesus didn't offer explanations, only Himself. V. 26. "I who speak to you am he."** Then she runs back into town, she is a similar witness, an unlikely one, and not even a thorough one, BUT contagious in its intimacy too: **"I just met this guy who told me all I ever did,"** is a long way from the Apostles Creed, the sinners prayer, or any other formula that we frequently reduce God's love to. She is not even a convinced witness: "This cannot be the Christ, can it?"

But like Jesus own offer to her, her witness is enough. It has several characteristics:

**First,** it is invitational (come and see), not judgmental...no thinly veiled ultimatims, nor threats of hell here... "Could He be the promised one?" I can still hear a counselor by "would you like to talk Ron."

**Second...** Like the women at the well, and the best invitations at

camp, they're all within present experience; there is no hawking of someone else's conclusions. Trying to understand that deep lived experience, the deep meanings of each life, and connecting it with the love of Jesus, is the secret of disciple making. What's on offer to this particular drawer of water, is "living water." If you send your 8 year old boys to camp, don't be surprised if they come home with stories about frogs!

**Third...** The account of the woman to her friends is honest to its own uncertainty, allowing people to arrive at their own conclusion. She asks "Could this be the savior we've been waiting for?" They respond: "This is indeed the Savior of the world"; no cleverly packaged answers to unasked questions here...no theological certainty that actually alienates people from our loving God...no attempts to brainwash, just an invitation to draw near.

**Fourth...** it is open to anyone who will hear of the desire of this God of Jacob and Jesus for people. I praise God for the deep desire to keep the issue of "accessibility" on the front burner. And the idea of sponsorships or scholarships is very true to that. If you have an estate, don't be afraid to drop a \$100,000 for scholarships at Pine Lake. The \$5000 that it will earn will really help the camp.

**And Fifth...** living water takes place not in some distant future that only Mt Garizim can supply, or recreational opportunities that we can never compete with, but NOW, **here at this well, called Camp Christian..**

**Could it be on this 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Christian camping among our tribe of churches in Alberta, that Christian camping fits smack in the middle of these love stories?**

We know the impact of 14 years of hard

labor of Jacob. Rachel was worth it!!! And so was being part of God's plan for history. We know the impact of women at the well. **"The Samaritans believed on account of her word."** What of the stories of the impact of those visionaries, the Bakers, the Miles, the Hanlans, Breakenridges, Bergmans, Rashes, and others? What of the boards and cooks, and maintenance people, and counselors, and deans, and teachers and life guards and fellow campers? Well they're still being told. As Doug Barrie says in his thesis on the history of the churches in Alberta: "Many young people have begun their Christian life and many have gone into ministry as result of the camp." P. 159

Don't miss the connection here though: Not any old water of any old lake will do: **Life flows ONLY with living water. Life is in Jesus (Full stop).** And the quest of the woman at the well, is the quest of you and I and every human being. We long for the water that will quench our thirst, the very water that Jesus longs to give us. I think the future of Christian camping is vibrant within this transcendent reality: **Jesus is here even now in our midst, offering us the living water we seek, in a place with wonderful possibilities for disorientation.** The question is very lively too, **Do you know the gift you hold, the One with open arms before you?**

We know the reality is here...and now...for its nearly mid-afternoon!

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