



First United Methodist Church - Moweaqua, Illinois

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Well What er

John 4: 5-42

Back before the turn of the century, when I was in seminary, a professor once asked us to write an essay describing why we liked Jesus. Our assignment was to identify a story in one of the four Gospels that made Jesus seem irresistible and then explain why the story made us feel that way. Now this is not as easy as it sounds. When you get right down to it the whole gospel makes Jesus look pretty irresistible. And some days you just like certain stories better than others. Have you ever noticed that? Believe me there are days when the story I like best is when Jesus gets angry and kicks over the money changers table. Then I have other days when I really appreciate the story of Jesus walking on the water...or the one where Jesus calms the storm. Or how about the time Jesus invites the little children to come to him. So you see.. it just depends. Well when all was said and done I finally settled on the story I just read.. the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. I like this story because it never fails to give me strength and hope and direction. It tells me that God loves those that we arrogantly deem to be undesirable. It tells me all I need to know about worship—that what God desires is a heart that worships in Spirit and truth. But most of this story nurtures and quenches the thirsting of my soul with its offer of Living water.

So let's start with the Samaritan woman at the well. To say the least she was an interesting character. Jesus himself tells us that she had five husbands. The gospel writer gives no indication of what happened in her previous marriages. Most people take this reference to mean that she was a loose woman. But in that day and age a woman who was living in adultery would have been stoned to death..so that really is not so likely. Furthermore, it could not have been the case that she divorced all these men, because women were not allowed to initiate a divorce. Therefore, the fact that she had 5 husbands does not necessarily imply anything about her morals. It may have been that all five husbands died. Or that this poor woman had been given in marriage to 5 losers. (Remember women did not arrange their own marriages either.) Perhaps she had been married to soldiers or men identified by the Romans to be insurrectionists, or maybe the men were older or in poor health. We don't even know how old she is...she may have been 75. We need to be careful not to read more into a scriptural passage than what it says. However, Jesus does say that she is currently living with a man who is not her husband...again it could be a brother or a son...or some other relative she looks after or cares for. Whatever the case...Jesus makes no further comment on the issue.

Next lets look how Jesus addresses this nameless woman. If we go back to the original language of the gospel..Greek..we will find that Jesus calls the woman "gune". Our Bibles simply say "woman" but the word "gune" actually means "special lady"...and that is the same term Jesus uses when he addresses his own mother when she stood at the foot of the cross. So whether the woman was another Paris Hilton or Mother Theresa, Jesus offered her a very tender greeting.

Of course, it impresses me that Jesus spoke to this woman at all. This was a scandalous encounter to say the least...not because Jesus was speaking to this particular woman but because Jesus was speaking to the woman at all. It was not the custom for men especially rabbis to speak to a woman in public...not even to their own mothers, daughters or wives. And to make matters worse Jesus was speaking to a SAMARITAN woman. Originally the Samaritans and the Jews were one people. But through some critical blunders by Solomon's son, David's nation of 12 tribes divided into two kingdoms ...ten tribes in the Northern part known as Israel and the two tribes in the Southern half known as Judah. Then somewhere around 722 B.C. the Assyrians overran the tribal lands of Israel. Judah was spared. Consequently the Assyrians captured most of the population of Israel they were taken from their lands and interspersed throughout the Assyrian empire in such a way that they were not allowed to live near one another. In time, they were assimilated into the Assyrian culture and have become known as the ten lost tribes of Israel.

Well, the truth of the matter is that you may be able to carry off most of a population but you can't carry off everybody. There are always people who know of a cave or a hole that they can crawl into...or are off visiting somewhere. Anyway, history tells us the remnant that was left behind eventually intermarried with the local natives who were not Jewish. Therefore, the people who lived in Judah thought of the Samaritans as tainted...no better than dogs.... even though the Samaritans retained vestiges of Jewish religious practice, even though they read and revered practically the same scriptures...the Jews said that the Samaritans were only fit to fuel the fires of Hades. And so centuries later when the Babylonians overran Judah and took the people of Judah into captivity...and later released them ...the prophets Ezra and Nehemiah would not permit the filthy mongrel Samaritans to help rebuild the temple in Jerusalemeven though the Samaritans offered. In fact Ezra and Nehemiah went so far as to insist that any Jew who was married to a Samaritan or a foreign wife send her and her children packing immediately. There are scholars who think that the story of Ruth was written as an antidote to their cold hearted prejudice.

So you can see that there were very hard feelings between the two groups. And Jesus, being the Son of God who created all nations, regularly tweaked the noses of the Pharisees by telling parables that featured the righteousness of Samaritans over that of the Jews. Remember the story of the Good Samaritan? And now we have Jesus, the Son of God, the holiest person on the face of the earth sitting in broad daylight at the community well... where everyone could see him, talking with a woman...a Samaritan woman of all people.

What does this tell us? Well, first of all it says that God wants to include all people of all nations and social strata in God's kingdom, even the ones that we personally do not like. We may like to think that God only cares about clean, educated, monogamous heterosexual Christians but the truth of the matter is that God loves all people...poor people, rich people, dirty people, clean people, child abusers, town drunks, yes even people who don't go to church. Now don't get me wrong, the openness and grace of God does not give us a license to sin. God hates sin. Sin is a grievous offense. But what it means is that in God's eyes everyone's sin is pretty much the same...sin is a willful or unintentional attachment to some object, attitude, lifestyle or

behavior that gradually becomes more important to us than God and God's desire for our lives.. Sin not only ruins our relationship with God, it usually gets in the way of our relationships with other people.

The point is that God has commanded us to love him, to listen to him, to live according to the way that he has told us to live which includes loving our neighbors...not just certain ones, but all our neighbors... And the amazing thing is that despite the fact that we still cling to our sin, our idols and our foolish notions...God loves us anyway. Just as we love our children who regularly ignore and disobey us so God loves his children. That is why God sent Jesus...to mend relationships, between God, ourselves and our neighbors, to show forth God's love. forgiveness and healing to all people despite all the big differences we think we see between ourselves and others.

The second truth we can learn from this story has to do with **God's desires in worship**. Let me tell you a story about two worshippers. The first worshipper, who we shall call Mrs. Jones, comes to church on Sunday, as she does every Sunday, and as she takes her seat she mutters under her breath because someone new is sitting in her usual pew. Furthermore, she spies Mrs. Daniels, one of the new people in church talking to these strangers and she grumbles under her breath about rude people don't know that they are supposed to sit quiet once they enter the sanctuary. Then the preacher who is too lazy to look at their watch starts the service 2 minutes late. The prelude begins and the organist hits at least three wrong notes and the tempo is way to peppy for worship. When the first hymn is announced Mrs. Jones gets even more perturbed because it is a song she does not know. The whole service is like that....the prayers are way too long. And when the time for the offering comes around she just knows that the preacher was staring at her the whole time. Finally the preacher begins the sermon ...it must have lasted a full half an hour and during that time the preacher mispronounced six words and stammered twice. After the last hymn was sung Mrs. Jones headed out the side door, muttering about how she could not see how anyone got anything out of that service.

The second worshipper, Mrs. Daniels, came to church that morning eager to worship the Lord. She was thrilled to death to see new people in service that morning and she was quick to welcome them. When the prelude began Mrs. Daniels spirit soared as she pondered the awesome nature of God. The hymns, especially the new one, spoke directly to her heart. Everything especially, the prayers seemed inspired that morning. The sermon really helped her to better understand and appreciate her relationship with God and it reminded her that she needed to be kinder to her mother in law and more patient in general. At the end of the service...she walked out the door thinking the day had been a blessing for truly she had been spiritually fed at the house of the Lord.

Two women came to worship at the same time at the same church and both of them found what they came for. But which one, I ask you, came to worship in Spirit looking for God's Truth?

Let's face it God is not interested in the warmth of our pews...what God cares about is the heat of our hearts. The criteria that God applies to our worship has less to do with our attendance records than it has to do with the openness and sincerity with which we approach his word. Don't get me wrong. Church attendance

is vitally important if we want to grow our souls... but we need to do more than go to church.. we must also enter into Worship. Which means like the Woman at the Well we allow the Spirit of God to help us compare our lives and our priorities with the truth revealed in Jesus Christ.. True worship requires we not only hear God's word but that we interact with it as well. True worship means that we accept the truth that God's word is actually conveying even if it tells us that

+++we are wrong. Spirit filled worship doesn't we mean we have to get noisy or toss ourselves about or speak strange tongues ...Spirit filled worship means that we allow God's Spirit to touch and change our hearts and minds so that we can live our lives more nearly to the example God gave us in the life of Jesus Christ.

Finally I find this story appealing because Christ's offering of living water still quenches the thirst of my soul. There was a time in my life when I was somewhat like the Samaritan Woman. Don't get all excited, I've only had one husband...but I felt like something in my life was missing. Although I had material blessings, a wonderful family and good health...I ached for something deeper. I felt like I was lost and drifting and I did not know where I was bound. And then one day I found myself at the spiritual well of St. Andrews United Methodist Church, and there I.. a life long Christian.. a person who had gone to church for 31 years...there I encountered a dear friend and teacher and Savior named Jesus...it was he who gave me a drink of the living water...And it was that living water that gave my life salvation...a new purpose.. a new sense of direction, a new identity.. yes even hope.

The good news is that Jesus offers this living water to you as well. But watch out! This water for living is pretty powerful stuff! Living water is the water that can heal your wounded heart. Living water is the water that puts out that anxious fire that flares up in your belly in the middle of the night. Living water comes to you...right where you are, and soothes you and cleanses you, and gives you peace. Living water makes you rethink your values and it will challenge your long held cherished beliefs and notions. Living water has the power to open your mind and your heart...your entire life to your new best friend Jesus Christ. Living Water will help you discovery great wealth and deeper meaning in all your relationships and it will increase your appreciation for the great gift of life that God has given you. In fact, it is this living water...that wells up into a spring of eternal life.

IT is my prayer this morning that each and every one of you drinks deeply and long from this well....that all of us renew our spiritual lives and make a sincere commitment to open our hearts and minds to God during this season of Lent. Come to the Well...the Savior is waiting