

THIRST THINGS FIRST

Sermon, March 15, 2020

Texts: Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:4-30, 39-42

Last week we looked at the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3. Nicodemus was religious, he was professional, he was educated, and he had social stature. In John 4, we find Jesus in conversation with a woman who was at the opposite end of that spectrum, religiously, socially and morally. The encounter in chapter three takes place in the evening, with a man, a Jew, and a respected leader in the community. The encounter in chapter four takes place at midday, with a woman, a Samaritan and probably a moral outcast of the community. In these back-to-back encounters we find Jesus somewhat characteristically crossing back and forth over the artificial boundaries we create of race, social status and gender. Incidentally, John devotes forty-two verses to telling the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well, which makes it the longest conversation ever recorded between Jesus and any other individual. That alone should get our attention.

Jesus was always raising eyebrows among the religious leaders of the day by talking with less than reputable people. In Jesus encounters with people such as this woman at the well, or the woman caught in adultery, or with the tax collector Zaccheus, He never talked *down* to them; He talked *with* them, treating them with dignity and respect. And He didn't just *talk* with them. He had dinner with them, He proclaimed the grace of God to them, and brought them into the kingdom of God. And as I've noted before, He never used "Bad Dog" lectures with such people (*"Look at what you did.. Bad dog!"*). If Jesus used Bad Dog lectures at all, it was with those who were *self-righteous*. The ones who really tried His patience were those thought *others* needed fixing, not them; those who could see what's wrong with everyone else except themselves. (*But you know, and this is almost another sermon, Jesus is even kind to many of those ... sometimes the people who are the most critical of others are those who are having such a very difficult time in their own lives and are very much in need of a Savior*). As Jesus told His critics, *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."* As He kept reminding people, He had come to seek and find and engage those who were lost, He came to rescue the perishing, to "save" (*as in salvage*) those whose lives were coming apart. This is not to say Jesus didn't care about behavior. He never said to those he encountered that it was okay to keep on sinning. Jesus cared very much about behavior, especially behavior that ruins lives and causes destruction and hurt. No, He basically told them to cut it out, and go and sin no more.

As long as there's been a church, there's been a debate about the best institutional model for the church. Some say the church should be a school, a training institution, for saints ... to train the "Nicodemuses" in godly living. So, to enter the membership of the "school" church, the prospect needs to "prove" he/she is a fit "student" by being an articulate believer and giving clear verbal evidence of intelligent and "saving" faith; in short, to be a "saint," so to speak, before he or she is accepted into the school-church. Others have maintained the church should primarily be a hospital for sinners, rather than a school for saints. You enter the church like you enter a hospital: you know you're sick and/or are in great need and you want to put yourself under the care of the Great Physician. Now, you don't get yourself well first and then enter the hospital! No one has to be healthy enough in order to be welcome at the hospital. All one has to do is recognize his or her need to be there, and to be willing to listen to the directives of the Physician. We are here because we need to be here, not because we deserve to be here. We are all a little bit sick! I say that with affection and with seriousness ... there really is something wrong with every one of us; that's why we are here!

Perhaps the best model for the church is little bit of both ... the church is a **teaching hospital**, a combination of school and hospital. We come to the teaching hospital-church to find healing and direction and guidance in healthy and wholesome living, AND we seek to help others do so as well.

With all that said, let's take a brief look at this long encounter in John 4. As Jesus was returning to Galilee from Jerusalem, He led his disciples through Samaria. Normally, Jews would take a long detour *around* Samaria; they would not take the road through that area (*I said during the sermon that it would be sort of like driving to Portsmouth, NH by making a wide circle around Boston and her suburbs; a member suggested afterwards that a better analogy for Rhode Islanders would be traveling from here to Newport by avoiding Jamestown!*) Time won't allow a

fuller explanation of why the Jews didn't associate with the Samaritans; just know it goes back centuries (*they are sort of like distant cousins very far removed*). On this particular day, Jesus and the disciples opt to take the direct route home through Samaria, and as they did so, Jesus sat down to rest by a well in the heat of the day outside of a town called Sychar. His disciples left Jesus and went to town to buy food.

Again, it was about noon, in the heat of the day, and this woman came to that well to draw water. Historians tell us women usually came to draw water in the morning or the evening, and they would come in groups; they would not come alone, nor would they come in the heat of the noonday sun. It is likely this woman came at this lonely hour because she was something of a social outcast. We see later in the story that when the disciples returned, they were surprised Jesus was speaking to this woman. That was partly because it was a common courtesy of the day that Jewish men rarely spoke to unescorted women in public; it simply wasn't considered proper or polite. So Jesus is breaching three cultural conventions of the day; speaking with a Samaritan, speaking with an unescorted woman, and speaking with a woman others probably wouldn't speak to. Jesus tells this woman, "*Go, call your husband, and come back.*" Jesus' request was both proper and strategic ... **proper**, because it wasn't an unusual request to make, as it was not regarded as good etiquette for a man to talk to a woman alone; **strategic**, because it gently called attention to the woman's need. She *had* no husband, she replied. Jesus responds in so many words, "*That's true. Actually, you have had five husbands, but you're right, the one you are living with now is not your husband.*"

The Gospel writer wants to underscore the point that Jesus really *knows* this woman, He *knows* her history, He *knows* she really has been married as many times as Tammy Wynette (*whose best-known song was "Stand by Your Man", and apparently had some difficulty doing so. She was married five times, one marriage lasting only 44 days. To be fair, though, her final marriage to George Richey lasted 20 years, from 1978 until the day she died in 1998 at the age of 56.*) She really has reached a "rocky point" in her own life. By the way, the Gospel writer gives no indication why this may be the case, probably to make the subtle point that it really isn't any of our business. Her apparently rocky love life doesn't necessarily mean the woman is immoral. Maybe she was widowed frequently; life spans were not nearly as long in that day and age. Maybe she couldn't conceive children, and none of the jerks she married would put up with that because they wanted offspring. Maybe she was abandoned by feckless men. We just don't know, nor are we told; again, it's probably John's way of saying, "*It's none of our business.*" The point is, *Jesus* knows all this about this woman, and He neither dismisses nor demeans her; He engages her in conversation.

When Jesus called this woman, "woman," some scholars say the particular term He uses is a gentle term of endearment, which may be better translated as "special lady." It's the same term Jesus used when He talked to His own mother at the wedding in Cana, and also when He spoke to His mother from the cross itself! So, Jesus calls this village outcast "special lady." He treated her with dignity and respect and kindness, the way we all want to be treated. He treated her as a person who really mattered.

I'm not much of a gardener, but one thing I do know is that every plant needs water, and especially the plants struggling the hardest. The struggling plants, the ones beginning to wither ... they respond much better to water than they do to added heat. Jesus treats this woman as a thirsty flower who needs the water of grace, not the heat of condemnation. Jesus knows her great thirst for something more than what she has had in life, and He offers her the Living Water. He offers her grace and nurture, not judgment and condemnation.

There is so much more that could be said about this encounter and the full meaning of Jesus' words and metaphors, but time won't allow; I close with this final point. We are told many Samaritans believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony. I find it striking that all of the otherwise respectable people in that town of Sychar would never have met Jesus were it not for this lonely woman who had to go to the well all by herself because she was, well, the outcast sinner. Yet it was the sinner who found Jesus first ... and it is always and only the sinner who truly finds Jesus.

Our text ends with the Samaritans saying, "*Truly, this is the Savior of the world.*" A little bible trivia for you: This is the *only* time in all four gospels where any human being calls Jesus Savior. And according to John, just who is it who first figures out Jesus is the Savior? It is people who have seen His saving grace in action in one of their neighbors, because she experienced that saving grace ... **and she told them about it.** Which is often how our neighbors learn about the Savior ... by seeing His grace in action in our lives, and by our telling them about it.