

Wesley United Methodist Church

March 19, 2017

“Changed Lives.”

John 4:5-42

One day a jet liner was flying from Washington, DC to Columbia, SC. On board was a counselor traveling to Columbus for a mental health conference at the University of South Carolina. The counselor was an atheist.

Somewhere during the flight, the pilot discovered that the landing gear was stuck. That meant trouble. He turned the plane and headed to Greensboro, North Carolina. There was a facility where mechanics on the ground could give instructions to the pilot and make visual observation as the plane flew overhead. The instructions which the mechanics gave were quite dramatic. Following their advice, the pilot put the plane through every acceptable procedure known to shake down the landing gear. He made several nose dives. He rocked the plane back and forth. He even put the plane through a stomach-churning free-fall. Meanwhile the passengers prepared for a crash landing. Finally, in a spray of sparks and flames, the pilot cradled the craft to a safe landing a few hundred yards from the maintenance hangar.

In an interview late that night, the counselor said that this was his first time flying. He said that during the tumbles, turns, and pitches of the plane, though he is an atheist, he prayed! “This might make me change my ways,” he concluded. I guess it might. Or might not.

There are stories in the Bible of people who met Christ and then changed their ways. One is the story of the woman at the well. We need to note, first of all, that this story is set in Samaria. You’re familiar with the prejudices that Jews had against Samaritans. The Samaritans were a group of Jews from the province of Samaria who had intermarried with foreigners. The Jews considered Samaritans as social outcasts, untouchables, racially inferior, practicing false religion. Both claimed to be descendants of the nation of Israel. Samaritans descended from the northern kingdom of Israel while the Jews descended from the southern kingdom of Judah. The Jews believed Jerusalem was the only true place of worship, while the Samaritans located the true place of worship at Mt. Gerizim. In 128 B.C., the Jews destroyed the Samaritan temple at Mt. Gerizim.

Any close physical contact with a Samaritan, drinking water from a common bucket, eating a meal together, would make a Jew ceremonially unclean. This meant that they were unable to participate in temple worship for a period of time. The hostility between the two groups was so great that Jewish travelers usually chose not to travel through the area where Samaritans lived. They would not even talk to each other. The relationship between the Jews and Samaritans was very similar to the relationship between the Jews and Palestinians today.

The Pharisee in his prayer would say, “I thank God that I am not a woman, Gentile, or Samaritan,” and would pray that the Samaritan not be included in the resurrection.

This is the background of this story. Jesus and his disciples have been traveling for some distance and he is tired and thirsty. His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. He sits down by a well, known as Jacob’s well. A Samaritan woman comes to the well to draw water. Jesus says to her, “Will you give me a drink?” Here we go again. There were not only strict rules about Jews and Samaritans talking to one another. There were also rules about men and women conversing. The Samaritan woman is surprised, and somewhat rude. She says to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?”

Can’t we all get along? If there was some way to remove blind hatred from human relationships, we could solve most of the world’s problems. Jews and Arabs, militant Islamists and people of the West. Even in our own land. Blacks, and white, Latinos, straight and gay. The list goes on and on. We may not agree with one another, we may not approve of one another, but must we hate? In the providence of God it’s probably no accident that our story for today is set in Samaria. The greatest problem in our world is not global warming or poverty. The greatest problem is the animosity between differing groups of people.

Jesus reached out to the Samaritan woman. When she somewhat turns aside his requests for water, he turns this chance encounter into an evangelistic opportunity. Jesus says to her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” This is a significant statement and with it Jesus is offering the gift of grace to this Samaritan woman.

We know that Jesus targeted his ministry at the Jews, and Jews alone. In Matthew 15:24 he says specifically, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” Yet here he was offering the gift of “living water” to a Samaritan woman. He explains to her that if you drink this living water, you will never be thirsty again. But she doesn’t get it. Because her response is, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” And Jesus says to her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” Oops!! We have a problem. “I have no husband,” she says. And Jesus says to her, “You are right when you say you have n husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands,

and the man you now have is not your husband.. What you've just said is quite true." "Sir," she said, "I can see that you are a prophet."

He was a prophet alright, but he was different than any other prophet she would ever encounter. He was breaking all the cultural taboos. He was reaching out to a woman, a Samaritan woman who had been married five times and who was now living with a man who was not her husband. And he offers her grace.

This is startling even to this day – not what it says about Jesus, but what it says about us. How did we as a faith community miss the Gospel so completely? How did we become so judgmental toward others? How did we allow ourselves to shut out those of whom we disapproved, when time and again Jesus did exactly the opposite? What is wrong with us that we cannot love those for whom he died?

You see, not only are we blinded by our prejudices toward people like the Samaritan woman with her unseemly lifestyle, we are also blinded to the fact that we are the Samaritan woman. We, too, have fallen short of the grace of God, but the hand of grace is reached out to us as well.

This is a story of a changed life. You may remember how the story ends. His disciples return and are surprised to find Jesus talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?" The woman is leaving her water jar and goes back to town and says to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" And the Gospel of John tells us that the people came out of town and made their way toward Jesus.

John concludes this story of the Samaritan woman like this: Many of the Samaritans from that town believed him because of the woman's testimony. Jesus stayed with them for about two days. And many became believers because of his words. They had heard for themselves and believed that he is the Savior of the world.

Jesus isn't walking physically among us anymore for people to hear his words, but he has us to share his grace. For us to share it, means we have to be receptive to receive it.

Bruce Larsen, in his book *Ask Me to Dance*, includes the story of a member of his congregation who had come from another country. Pastor Larsen said of this person, "Her faith sparkled and the living water of the spirit flowed out of her soul to all around her." He invited her to go to a seminar on the topic of evangelism. The leaders had prepared tables filled with all sorts of pamphlets and strategies and demographic studies, all aimed at reaching the un-churched in their area. At some point during the program the leaders turned to this woman and asked her to share some of the reasons that made the church important and so vital in her home country. At first, she was intimidated by the crowds, but then she had this to say, "Well, we never gave pamphlets to people because we never had any. We just showed people by our life and example what it is like to be a Christian, and when they can see for themselves, then they want to be a Christian."

That's the bottom line, isn't it? "We just showed people by our life and example what it is like to be a Christian, and when they see for themselves, then they want to be a Christian, too."

After her encounter with Jesus, the Samaritan woman passed the test for being an effective Christian witness. The question is, in light of Christ's great love for all people, can we?