

## Meeting the Master ... Beside Jacob's Well

Sterling UMC  
John 4:1-26  
March 27, 2011

It all started with a simple request for a drink of water. It is noon, the hottest part of the day. Jesus has been traveling with the disciples. He's on his way from Jerusalem, traveling north to the area of Galilee. The journey takes them through the countryside of an area called Samaria.

Noon finds them paused on the way near the city of Sychar. Jesus is tired from all the traveling. So he stops to rest by the well where the people of Sychar come to get water while his faithful followers go into the city to pick up some lunch. It's a famous well, a landmark in the community. It was known as Jacob's well, the place where tradition says that the great biblical patriarch Jacob met his wife Rachel.

As Jesus gazes towards the city, looking in the direction that the disciples have gone, he sees a lone figure approaching. This figure continues to make its way towards the well where Jesus sits, and Jesus immediately recognizes that something is wrong with this picture.

First of all, the figure approaching is a woman and she's coming to the well in the middle of the day, and she's coming alone.

Noon time was the wrong time for any woman to come to the well. During the day, women were secluded within their homes, seeing to their domestic duties. It was the men who gathered at this public community place during the middle part of the day, and for that reason alone no woman would come to the well at this hour. Because coming to the well now, in the presence of men was a shameful, brazen thing to do. To do such a thing would ruin her reputation.

But it wasn't just coming to the well in the middle of the day that was shameful. She was coming alone. No woman would come to such a public place alone. She is breaking with all the conventions of society. There was something unique about this woman.

Coming to the well all alone gives a person time to think. I wonder what was going on in her head. What was she mulling over on that long walk to the well? I wonder if it was the predicament she found herself in that sent her to the well alone in the middle of the day.

Women had been carrying water back and forth from this well for generations – ever since Rachel, and before that. In fact, it was at this very well Rachel had met her future husband, Jacob. Maybe she thought of that story as she walked to the well. Maybe this would be her lucky day as well! Maybe things could be different for her? Maybe she wishing that someone, anyone could help her find a way out, could save her, could

rescue her from her burdens? Could change her life? Maybe she would meet a man who would take her away from all this! Yeah, right!

She hadn't had very good luck with men. She had five husbands, five failed marriages, and even now the man she was with was not her husband.

When she arrived at the well, Jesus was already there. She could tell by his dress but he was not from Samaria – he was a Jew. She shuddered, hoping she would not have to talk to him. Jews and Samaritans were enemies... had been for four hundred years; they just didn't get along very well. She walked to the part of the well that was farthest away from him and set down her job so she could lower it down to draw water. Most people would have turned away from this labeled scarlet woman for fear of guilt by association, but not Jesus. He asked her to share some water with Him. She was astonished and in her amazement she said: "You are a Jew; I'm a Samaritan; you mean you want to associate with me? You actually want to share water with me? Is this legal? Don't you know who I am?"

Jesus goes on not only to share water with her, but conversation (which also was unheard of)... and in that time of communication, He shared with her the good news of who He was and what He could do for her... and how He could give her living water and forgiveness and new life.

And she got so excited, she tossed her water jar aside and ran back to town to tell everyone that she had met the Christ. I love this story for a number of reasons. It is so rich with meaning. There are so many different lessons we can learn from this meeting beside Jacob's well. But this morning let me lift up three elements in this great story that underscore three main points of the Christian Gospel. Are you ready? Here's number one...

**FIRST OF ALL, JESUS REACHED OUT TO HER; HE TOOK THE INITIATIVE.**

Last week we looked at Nicodemus and his meeting with the Master. Nicodemus sought out the Master. Under the cover of darkness Nicodemus reached out to Jesus. In this story we see the exact opposite. Jesus reaches out to her. He took the initiative. And this is an odd and unusual thing because this Samaritan woman – the woman at the well was someone on the total opposite end of the social spectrum.

She was everything that Nicodemus was not. Think about it:

He was a Jew, she was a Samaritan  
He was a man, she was a woman  
He was learned, she was ignorant,  
He was morally upright, she was of questionable morals  
He was wealthy and from the upper class, she was ignorant, probably an outcast  
He recognized Jesus' merits, she saw him only as a curious traveler.  
Nicodemus was serious and dignified, she was flippant and possibly boisterous"

But none of that mattered in Jesus' mind. He reached out to her. He took the initiative. This is what is called prevenient grace or better put amazing grace.

The woman at the well did nothing to merit His attention, did nothing to earn His forgiveness, and did nothing to deserve His love. It was freely given and Jesus took the initiative in offering it. He sought her out. He reached out to her.

Jesus reached out to that Samaritan woman. He didn't wait. He took the initiative... That's one of the greatest things about Christian love. It doesn't wait around to be asked. It seeks people out. It reaches out with love and grace, with forgiveness and reconciliation. That's number one: Jesus reached out to the woman. He took the initiative... and you know He is reaching out with love and forgiveness to you and me right now.

## SECOND, JESUS BROKE DOWN THE BARRIERS THAT DIVIDE PEOPLE.

There is a Gospel Song that has these words: "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, There is something about that name."

Indeed, there is. The name "Jesus" of course means "Savior" or "The Lord's Helper" but also (don't miss this now)... the name "Jesus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew name "Joshua." And we remember, of course, who Joshua was. He was the one who caused "the walls to come tumblin' down." Remember how the spiritual sings it:

"Joshua fit the battle of Jericho... and the walls come a-tumblin down."

So, Jesus is well named because He also is a wall-breaker. As Ephesians 2:14 puts it... "He has made us one and has broken down the dividing walls of hostility."

We see that so vividly here in John 4. Look at the barriers He knocks down here. The walls that separate men and women. The walls that separate Jews and Samaritans. The walls that separate a respected rabbi and a notorious outcast... all of those walls come tumbling down because of His love and grace and forgiveness.

I saw a sign in a business recently that read like this: "To err is human... to forgive is not our policy." Some people live like that and it is so sad. In Jesus' day, the Jews and Samaritans lived like that.

Prejudice, bigotry, vengeance, harshness toward one another... all of these are sinful. They are dividing walls. They are spiritual poisons. Think about it like this: If you put a plastic covering over a plant, the rain and sun can't get to it... and the plant will wither and wilt and ultimately die. Prejudice and bigotry and hatred are like that plastic covering. We can't be spiritually healthy until that plastic covering is removed.

Let me ask you something: Has someone hurt you? Do you feel estranged or alienated

or walled off from anybody? Do you have bitterness in your heart toward any other person? If so, go fix that! Don't wait around any more, don't put it off any longer. For your sake, for their sake, for God's sake... go fix it! Ask God to go with you. Ask God to be within you... and with His help and power, go set it right. Go break down that dividing wall of hostility.

If we want to serve Christ, if we want to do His work, if we want to live in His Spirit... then our calling is to join forces with Him in knocking down the dividing walls of pride and prejudice and hostility... and in building bridges of love and understanding and acceptance and forgiveness.

When this woman met the master beside Jacob's well first, Jesus took the initiative and reached out to her and second He broke down the barriers that divide people.

THIRD AND FINALLY, HE CHANGED HER LIFE.

Talk about change, someone has said the woman at the well became the first missionary. She was so excited about what she had found in Christ that she forgot her water jar... and ran to tell the people in town that she had discovered the Messiah.

Notice this. At first, she was suspicious of Jesus; she was remote, standoffish and flippant. She saw Him as the enemy, the opponent, the adversary, but then at the end of their visit, she saw Him as the Messiah.

What made the difference? How did the redemption happen? What caused the dramatic change? It didn't happen through criticism or fussing or nagging or harsh judgment. It happened because Jesus loved her, accepted her, included her, respected her, cared about her.

When will we ever learn this? Change does not come from harshness. It comes from unconditional love! If you want to convert somebody, don't fuss at them... love them!

Indeed it is! And that's what Jesus shows us here in John 4. Jesus took the initiative that day and reached out to the woman and today in the same way He reaches out to you.

You see I believe we are a lot like this Samaritan woman. We come needy, hungry, thirsty for something to satisfy our hearts. We come with all of our baggage, all of our failures, all of our questions, all of our doubts, all of our sins. We seeking something to quench the thirsting of our souls. And somewhere along the way we encounter Jesus. It may not be beside a well, but perhaps we meet him in the kind words or compassionate face of a Christian friend. Perhaps we meet him in the words of a song or a hymn we hear played or sung. Perhaps we come face to face with him in the pages of His Holy Word as we take the time to read and reflect on what it has to say. Perhaps maybe even here today, in this time of worship you have met the Master. He is everywhere if we will just open our eyes and ears and hearts.

The good news is that when you meet him, as with the woman at the well, he takes the initiative. He doesn't wait. He reaches out with love and grace, with forgiveness and reconciliation and offers you the living water to quench the thirsting of your needy heart and soul.

The better news is that He breaks down all the barriers. And how does He do that? He has done it once and for all by the cross. The cross bridges the gap, it tears down the barrier of sin that separates you from God and allows you to once again to have perfect fellowship and communion with him.

And the best news is that He changes your life. When you meet Him, when you open yourself to Him, when you give Him your heart, your life is never the same. Where there was fear there is now faith. Where there was worry there is now peace. Where there was shame there is now forgiveness.

With His unconditional love, Jesus changed that woman's life. Listen, he can today change your life. He knows all about us and He still loves us and he comes offering forgiveness and reconciliation to you and me.

I would like to close with this invitation. It is an invitation from the Master. He says, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters..." Is that you today? Are you thirsty?

There are very few of us who cannot say that at one time or another you have found yourself in a spiritual valley and feeling that you are nothing more than a pile of dry bones. Circumstances of this life relentlessly beat down upon you as the sun and the winds of adversity blow through your life and you begin to feel spiritually void. It is as if you are walking through an endless desert. You feel isolated, cut off from God. It's parched. It's dusty. It's barren. You long for help and relief. You yearn for an oasis in the middle of the desert. You come to church, but you feel like your just going through the motions. Worship is hollow and meaningless. There is no power or joy in your life. You try to pray but your prayers don't seem to get any higher than the ceiling. It is a dry desolate desert from which there seems to be no joy, no hope of escape. It's a dead place because there is no fruit there. It is a dangerous place, and no one should stay there.

Maybe that's you today. If so the Lord offers you this invitation. "Come, you who are thirsty, come to the waters." He offers us the living water and only he can satisfy.

Jesus said, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." (John 7:37-38 NIV)

That afternoon long ago the Samaritan Woman meet the Master beside jacob's well. He took the initiative, broke down the barriers, and changed her life. Today may He do the same for you.