

High Noon at the Well

John 4.5-42

⁵ So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. ⁷ There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." ¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet." ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵ The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." ²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he." ²⁷ Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you seek?" or, "Why are you talking with her?" ²⁸ So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, ²⁹ "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" ³⁰ They went out of the town and were coming to him. ³¹ Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."

JESUS' FOLLOWERS WORSHIP IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH

Introduction

Some of you've heard the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well many times. That's great – it means you probably know the story almost by heart. You know the woman's great questions: "How is that you, a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" or "Where do you get this living water?" or "Can this man be the Christ?" But as with all stories we hear over and over again, we often forget that they could've turned out differently. What if, for example, the story turned out like this?

Jesus came to a town of Samaria called Sychar. Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." The Samaritan woman said to him, "I don't give drinks to Jews." (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "I get living water from the same place I've always gotten it. Why would I want to drink YOUR living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob?" Jesus continued to plead with her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but

whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “I’m not really interested in that kind of water.” Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; what you have said is true.” The woman said to him, “What business is it of yours if I have no husband? Where do you get off insulting me by insinuating there’s something wrong with my life or my lifestyle choices? No one tells me how many husbands I can have, or who I can marry, least of all you. Our fathers worshiped God on this mountain, you worship in Jerusalem. That’s your choice, but you can’t tell me I’m ‘wrong’ to worship here instead of there.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “You’re obviously not very tolerant of other people’s religions. You’ve insulted me twice now. Who or when I marry is my business. My parents worshipped God at this mountain, I’ve worshipped God at this mountain all my life, and I’ll always worship God at this mountain when and how I choose, and there’s no one going to tell that’s right or wrong. This conversation is over.” Jesus wept.

Suddenly the encounter with the woman at the well takes on a whole new meaning. It’s not so “ordinary” any more. In fact, it’s rather amazing. I would hazard to guess that almost every Missouri Synod pastor in Philadelphia would give their eye-teeth for a discussion with someone to turn out like Jesus’ discussion did. Usually they turn out like the story I just read. Why is that? What makes the story of Jesus’ encounter as John records it so special, so unique?

I. Tradition Must Come Second to Truth

When I find myself in Jesus’ position at the well, trying to talk to people about faith in Jesus Christ, they will usually appeal, first of all, to their own traditions. They’ll say, “Well, I’ve always been Catholic / Methodist / Agnostic / Muslim etc. My grandparents went to this church / synagogue / mosque, my parents went here, and now I’m a member here. I’ve always been a member here and will be until I die.” Or, “I was a member here in the very beginning of this church / synagogue / mosque. Therefore it’s my church / synagogue / mosque.” They may never actually attend *services*, they may have no idea what their churches *believes* or *teaches*, but by golly, it’s their church, and ain’t no one going to tell them otherwise.

The woman at the well had her own church. It had been her grandparent’s church, her parent’s church, and now it was hers. We’ll call it the First Church of Mt. Gerizim. Back around the time of the death of King Solomon, one of his sons decided he needed to do something about the northern tribes that were getting restless. His older counselors said, “Give them time.” His younger counselors said, “Give them hell.” He went with the younger counselors. Taxes went up, and before long there was civil war. The northern tribes split

from Judah and Benjamin in the south, and instead of worshipping at Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, which was in the south, they worshipped at Mt. Gerizim. So our Samaritan woman's relatives had been worshipping at for almost a thousand years. That's double the time that there's been a Lutheran church, eight times longer than there's been a Missouri Synod.

Despite all this tradition, she's still willing to listen to this Jew, one from the hated tribe of Judah who still worshipped in Jerusalem. Isn't that remarkable? She was willing to test her own faith against his, to see where the real truth about God lay. Even though she'd been a Samaritan all her life, she was willing to give this Jewish man a listen. *She was willing to let go of her tradition, in order to seek after the Truth.*

II. Opinions Must be Willingly Tested

The other thing that happens when I find myself at the well talking to Samaritan men and women is that they often make THEMSELVES their OWN tradition. "I know what I believe" they say, "and no one will ever change my mind." Well that's helpful. Imagine if we all went to school in kindergarten and said, "I know the first letter of the alphabet is D, and NO ONE is going to teach me otherwise." It is a free country – you can believe the alphabet starts with D, or that black is white, or that the $2+2 = 5$. But no one has to hire you, either.

The Samaritan woman had some of her own ideas about religion. She knew there would be a Messiah who would come and teach his people all things. But she was also willing to entertain the notion that this *Jesus* might be the Messiah. She had certain notions of the kinds of things a Messiah would do from the Samaritan Scriptures. She put them to the test against Jesus.

She also had notions about where you should and shouldn't worship. She didn't completely throw away the traditions of her fathers and mothers. But she was willing to test them against Jesus' words. She obviously had an interesting marital life. But she was willing to explore what kind of life that was with this Jewish man at the well. Not ONCE does she say, "Well, that's what I believe, and no one's going to change my mind." Instead, she tests everything, searching for the Spirit of God.

III. True Worshippers Worship in Spirit and Truth

The Samaritan woman, you see, is exactly the kind of worshipper the Father is looking for. He's looking for people who will worship the Father in Spirit and in Truth. That means, first of all, that they won't be caught up in manmade traditions. The Pharisees and Sadducees were so tied to their own traditions that they didn't recognize the Son of God when he came and walked among them. We don't want to have the same thing happen to us.

May I never hear ANYONE in this congregation say, "I'm a Lutheran because I've always been a Lutheran." If I had approached the Christian faith that way, I would never be standing in a Missouri Synod pulpit in the United States. I'd probably be working for a Buddhist or Hindu food bank in Toronto.

May I never hear ANYONE in this congregation say, “I’m a member of St. Mark’s because I like the pastor.” If you’re here because of me, you are here for the wrong reasons. Did I die for you? Will I rise up from my tomb three days after I die? Not unless that happens to be the day Christ returns!

May I never hear ANYONE in this congregation say, “I’m a member because my name is in the St. Mark’s phone directory, or because I was baptized here, or because I was confirmed here, or because I like the stained glass, or even because I like the people.” Those are dead traditions and opinions. If the Samaritan woman at the well had worshipped as a Samaritan for ANY of those reasons, she would have missed out on the LIVING WATER that leads to ETERNAL LIFE that Jesus wanted so badly to give her.

A true Christian, who worships the Father in Spirit and Truth, asks only one question when they’re looking for a congregation to join – “Do I hear in this church the Word of God preached fully, the laws and commandments of God and most importantly the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ?” Do I hear in this church the Spirit of God, the living water? The Truth of God, as found in the Scriptures? Will the pastor and people there lead me to worship God in Spirit and in Truth? Or will I just be worshipping at some meaningless mountain for the rest of my life, not knowing why I’m there except that I’ve always been there?

Conclusion

Back in the eighties and nineties there was a British pop band called “Level 42.” They had a song called “Heaven in My Hands.” In the chorus, the lead singer sings:

I was lonely going nowhere, drowning on dry land. I was almost stranded there, a shipwreck on the sand. But now I’ll chase the whole world over, trying to understand. And I won’t stop until I’m holding heaven in my hands.

Now there’s someone who worship the Father in Spirit and Truth. Someone who realizes when they’re lonely and going nowhere, but is willing to search the whole world over for living water. We bear witness, you and I, that Jesus is that living water we need for eternal life. By his death and resurrection he reveals to us the spirit and truth of his Father. By the living water of the words of his mouth he strengthens us for every challenge, steels us for every obstacle, shields us from sin, death and the devil. It is in Christ by his Spirit and in his Truth, that we hold heaven in our hands.

May we all be like the Samaritan Woman at the Well. Come, and drink deeply from the living water that is Jesus Christ, our great God and Savior.

Amen.