

“An Unlikely Witness”
John 4: 5-30, 39-42
Sunday, March 27, 2011
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

In the scripture reading we are studying this morning, Jesus talks about true worship.

The story is told of a visiting minister who once substituted for the great orator Henry Ward Beecher. The visiting minister was Beecher’s brother. A large audience had already assembled to hear Beecher, and when the substitute pastor stepped into the pulpit, several disappointed listeners began to move toward the exits. That's when the minister stood and said loudly, "All who have come here today to worship Henry Ward Beecher may now withdraw from the church. All who have come to worship God keep your seats!"

The Samaritan woman learned a great deal from Jesus on that day at the well, including who should be the proper focus of our worship. Leonard Sweet provides some helpful background:

“You can go to Israel today and take a journey to Samaria to the town of Sychar. A place the passage of time seems to have forgotten. Not many people live there, about 300, and they still consider themselves Samaritans.

“The primary structure in town is a kind of cellar, which houses a well, the only source of water for miles. Archeologists estimate its date upwards of 4,000 years. Weary travelers have quenched their thirst there since the time of Jacob. But even more fascinating than its archeological significance is the fact that this place historically validates for us the precise location where the Samaritan woman had an encounter with the Christ. It's hard to believe but

the authenticity of the well is undisputed. Samaritans, Muslims, Christians, Jews all agree that this is the place where the story took place.”

I. Being honest about ourselves.

As our gospel reading says, it was about noon in Sychar when Jesus asked a woman for a drink of water. He was hot and tired and dusty and exhausted from traveling in the noonday sun. The disciples had gone off into the village to buy food.

In talking with the woman of Samaria, Jesus broke at least two social rules of the day. Men do not speak to women in public. And Jews do not speak to Samaritans at all. Samaritans are ritually unclean, and probably just plain filthy in general. They are low lifes. Dogs.

The people of Samaria are not good Jews. They are Jews who have, over generations, engaged in mixed marriages with the Arab race. The people of Samaria are not even faithfully practicing the Hebrew religion, but are mixing Judaism with remnants of their earlier pagan rituals.

The woman says, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” Jesus replies, “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.”

You can almost hear the Samaritan woman laughing at Jesus. “Sir, you have no bucket,” ... “...and the well is deep.” ... “Where do you [think you are going to] get that living water?”!! ... I mean, who do you think you are?!! ... “Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?”

Jesus assures her that, “...those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty [again].” The woman gets a bit interested now. “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Suddenly, Jesus turns the tables on her. “Go, call your husband, and come back.”

He is digging deeper into her life, delving into a topic she would rather not discuss. We learn that she has had five husbands, but that the man she is currently with is not her husband.

In answering Jesus’ questions honestly, the woman of Samaria starts down a new path. She doesn’t know it yet, but her life is about to change. Drastically. By being honest about herself – by confessing to Jesus about her immoral lifestyle – she opens the way to new possibilities for herself and for those around her. She begins the path to becoming a follower of Jesus.

Robert Bachelder, in his book, Between Dying And Birth, retells this popular story from East Africa: “A simple woman always walked around with her bulky Bible. She never was parted from it. So the villagers began to tease her: ‘Why always the Bible?’ they asked. ‘There are so many other books you could read.’ Yet the woman kept on living with her Bible, neither disturbed nor angered by all the teasing. But finally one day, she knelt down in the midst of those who laughed at her. She held up the Bible, high above her head, and said with a great smile: ‘Yes, of course there are many books which I could read. Yet there is only one book which reads me.’”

Jesus, the Living Word, reads the heart and soul of the Samaritan woman. Her eyes begin to open. She begins to see herself – and Jesus! – in a new light. She begins to open to the truth.

II. Being open to the truth about Jesus.

The Samaritan woman says, “Sir, I see you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” She is

beginning to question the religion she has grown up with. She feels thirsty for more. In the presence of Jesus – whom she does not yet know – she becomes painfully aware of the emptiness of her life.

Bob Deffinbaugh shares this story about stubbornness in his book, The Woman at the Well:

“This is the transcript of an ACTUAL radio conversation of a US naval ship with Canadian authorities off the coast of Newfoundland in October, 1995. Radio conversation released by the Chief of Naval Operations 10-10-95.

“Americans: Please divert your course 15 degrees to the North to avoid a collision.

“Canadians: Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees to the South to avoid a collision.

“Americans: This is the Captain of a US Navy ship. I say again, divert YOUR course.

“Canadians: No. I say again, you divert YOUR course.

“Americans: THIS IS THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER USS LINCOLN, THE SECOND LARGEST SHIP IN THE UNITED STATES’ ATLANTIC FLEET. WE ARE ACCOMPANIED BY THREE DESTROYERS, THREE CRUISERS AND NUMEROUS SUPPORT VESSELS. I DEMAND THAT YOU CHANGE YOUR COURSE 15 DEGREES NORTH, THAT’S ONE FIVE DEGREES NORTH, OR COUNTER-MEASURES WILL BE UNDERTAKEN TO ENSURE THE SAFETY OF THIS SHIP.

“Canadians: This is a lighthouse. Your call.”

“When the captain of the USS Lincoln finally learned that the ‘Canadian crew’ was someone tending a lighthouse, things took their proper perspective. The American vessel

changed course.

“If the woman at the well is to come to a saving faith, she must change her course.”

I believe it is her spiritual thirst that moves the Samaritan woman to contemplate changing her course. She doesn't quite understand it, she doesn't really even know it yet, but she has a deep longing for Jesus. This longing has been with her all her life. A kind of emptiness that she can't explain. She pushes the emptiness away with countless meaningless relationships. She buries her longing for truth under a façade of sarcasm and bravado.

C. S. Lewis makes this observation about that unnamed longing:

“Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning can really satisfy. I am not now speaking of what would ordinarily be called unsuccessful marriages, or holidays, or learned careers. I am speaking of the best possible ones. There was something we grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in reality. I think everyone knows what I mean. The wife may be a good wife, and the hotels and scenery may have been excellent, and chemistry may be a very interesting job, but something has evaded us.”

The Samaritan woman has just met the One who can quench her thirst, the One for whom she has been longing her whole life, the One who can fill the emptiness she runs to escape. She just doesn't know it yet. She has a glimmer of the truth; she is searching. She is opening her heart and soul and mind to the possibility that Jesus has something to offer her.

Jesus begins to teach her, saying, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming -- **and is now here!** -- when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

She is working hard to understand. She says, haltingly, “I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.”

Jesus states the truth, plainly, to her: “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Now she sees. The disciples return from the village. They are, as usual, completely confused and totally in the dark. They have so many questions – why is Jesus talking with this woman, this Samaritan? They want to shoo her away. She is repulsive to them. She is an insult to their rabbi and master. But at least, according to the gospel of John, they manage to keep their mouths shut.

III. Being witnesses for Him.

Meanwhile, the Samaritan woman has been changed. Jesus has opened her eyes, her heart, her mind, her soul. She leaves her water jar at the well and runs to the village to witness to the truth she has received: “Come and see a man,” she breathlessly exclaims, “who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

Her testimony is tentative. She is unsure of herself, at the same time that she is overwhelmed with joy and wonder and excitement. She cannot contain herself! Verse 39 reads, “Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony.”

Certainly this woman is disdained, maybe even in her own village, by people who judge her for her lifestyle. She is – to the world’s eyes -- an unlikely witness for Jesus, given her immoral ways and her brash behavior.

Of course, she is just the sort of person Jesus seeks out. He does not look for the self-satisfied. He has no time for those who think they are without sin. He is not interested in people who think they have all the answers to life’s spiritual questions.

He wants to talk to people like the Samaritan woman. He looks for people who are thirsty, people who have an unnamed longing, people who know the emptiness inside. He seeks out people who are ready to be open about their sinfulness. He finds people who are ready to hear more about his truth.

They make the best witnesses for Him. He likes the unlikely. They are his favorites!

David E. Leininger tells this story:

“This wonderful man was not well educated and his manner was somewhat rough and crude. He became a Christian and took the Lord's requirement seriously. He kept pestering his pastor to put him to work. Finally, the minister handed him a list of ten names with this explanation: ‘These are all members of the church, but they seldom attend. Some of them are prominent people in the community. Contact them about being more faithful. Here is some church stationary to write letters. Get them back in church.’

“The man accepted the challenge with rugged determination and enthusiasm. About three weeks later a letter from a prominent physician whose name had been on the list arrived at the church office. Inside was a large check and a brief note: ‘Dear Pastor, Enclosed is my check for \$1,000 to help make up for my missing church so much, but be assured that I will be present this Lord's Day and each Lord's Day following. I will not by choice miss services again.

Sincerely ... P.S. Would you please tell your secretary that there is only one 'T' in dirty and no 'C' in Skunk.'

“Ah, those unexpected evangelists. To this day, that nameless Samaritan woman, the first unexpected evangelist, is revered in many cultures. In southern Mexico, La Samaritana is remembered on the fourth Friday in Lent, when specially-flavored water is given to commemorate her gift of water to Jesus. The Orthodox know her as St. Photini, or Svetlana in Russian. Her name means ‘equal to the apostles,’ and she is honored as apostle and martyr on the Feast of the Samaritan Woman.

“Can you do what she did?” asks Leininger. “Invite friends and neighbors? Of course, you can,” Leininger encourages.

Closing.

D. L. Moody was once criticized by a church woman for his methods of evangelism in attempting to win people to the Lord. Moody is quoted by James S. Hewett: "I agree with you. I don't like the way I do it either. Tell me, how do you do it?" The lady replied, "I don't do it." Moody retorted, "Then I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it."

Like the Samaritan woman at the well, you and I are unlikely witnesses for Christ. God can use you. God can use me. Flawed and reticent as we are, we are called to witness to what He has done, and is doing, in our lives and in the world.

Amen.