

Sermon: "The Odd Couple"

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A LOVE STORY

I've been listening to the story of the woman at the well for as long as I can remember. But, a commentator made a connection with the Old Testament that I haven't heard before. He remarked that Jesus meeting the woman at the well is reminiscent of an old love story.

I bet many of you know the story. (Genesis 29) The sojourner, Jacob comes to the well at high noon. There he beholds his kinswoman Rachael and her father's sheep. There is a large stone which covers this well. Jacob rolls the stone away, waters the sheep, and kisses the girl.

That girl must have really been a good kisser or Jacob must have been in the desert a really long time because the Scripture tells us that he wept out loud when he kissed her.

Despite his overeager ways and a very tricky father-in-law by the name of Laban, this love story does have a happy ending. After many years Jacob marries the girl of his dreams, and (with a big assist from Rachael's sister Leah whom he also married) they have many children who will eventually form the twelve tribes of Israel.

THE ODD COUPLE

But, in John's remake of this story things take a decidedly different turn. There is no love at first sight when Jesus speaks to the woman at the well. It is a confrontation.

He is the teacher from above, filled with heavenly wisdom. She is a woman of the world who had become hardened to life and the jokes they tell about her in the village. Like Jesus, she too is thirsty, but for something that she cannot name.

They make quite an odd couple.

I'm old enough to remember George Burns, but I'm not quite old enough to remember the comedy routines George did with his wife, Gracie Allen. However, through the miracle of film I have seen them together, and I must say they played the odd couple role to the hilt. Poor Gracie always seemed to misunderstand what George was saying. It was as if they were living in a different world, and therein lay the comedy.

Today's story from the gospel of John at times seems like a comedy routine between George Burns and Gracie Allen. The woman at the well misunderstands everything Jesus does and says. Jesus asks her for a drink of water, and she thinks this Jewish man is trying to cause her trouble. Doesn't he know that Jews and Samaritans hate each other?

In return, Jesus suggests that he could give her "living water", and then she thinks he's really daffy. She said, "Living water? Why you don't even have your own bucket so you can draw water from the well. What's all this talk about giving me living water?"

WATER FOR OUR DRY SPOT

But, despite the misunderstanding and mistrust in this conversation, when Jesus talks about water welling up to eternal life, this thirsty woman finally recognizes that Jesus is speaking metaphorically. He is offering a spiritual blessing, and she wants a drink. She says, "Sir, give me this water."

Now it would have been very easy for Jesus and this woman at the well to have a long, involved theological discussion about "living water." But, true spirituality is always grounded in personal reality. In order for this woman to receive living water, she had to talk about that part of her life that was dry.

In response to her request for living water, Jesus said, "Go call your husband and come back." She replied, " I have no husband."

And Jesus retorted, "You're right in saying that you have no husband. You have five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband."

What are the words to that old song, "looking for love in all the wrong places"? That was the story of her life. But, sometimes I think we focus too much on her and not enough on us. If we want living water, if we want eternal life, we must go down that same painful path of self-evaluation. And the first step in that process is to look honestly at our own lives.

Where are we dry? Where do we have a thirst in our lives? Some of us might be like the woman at the well. We might have a hard time establishing a meaningful, loving relationship. Perhaps we are trying to recover from a divorce. Perhaps we are having trouble with one of our children. Perhaps are addicted to alcohol or drugs. Perhaps we are anxious or depressed.

One thing is sure. Somewhere in our life we have a dry spot. Somewhere in our life we have a thirst that cannot be satisfied no matter how many times we go to the well. Someone whimsically told me this past week, "It seems like all our families are dysfunctional."

And that's true. All of us, no matter how hard we try, all of us have a broken spot in our families and in our life that is not easily fixed.

In fact, for many of us, that broken spot may seem beyond repair.

DENIAL

One way to deal with that broken, dry spot in our life is to pretend that it doesn't exist. In fact, I have found that this is our favorite technique, denial. And we will go to great lengths to keep from having a reality check. And we often focus on someone else's problem instead of having the courage to look at our own lives.

That's what the woman had been trying to do. Instead of drawing her water in the cool of the morning, she draws her water during the heat of the day. Why? So, she can avoid others who might indelicately bring up the awkward facts about her lifestyle.

And when Jesus talks directly about the dry spot in her life, she responds by using one of the greatest tools ever invented when it comes to denial. She turns to religion. She said,

"Well, you've got me there Jesus. You must be a prophet.

And speaking of prophecy, 'Have you read the new Left Behind series?' Some people say it's all a bunch of bull, but you, being a prophet, I bet you could give me the inside scoop."

(I know. That wasn't exactly what she said, but that's the idea.)

It might seem like a strange thing for a minister to say, but I get suspicious when people get overly religious in their everyday conversations!

I wonder what they are trying to hide.

You see, I know from personal experience that religion can be a very effective smokescreen when someone is getting too close to a painful truth.

TELLING THE TRUTH

It's not that we shouldn't think about the grace of God and worship God every minute of our lives. After all, we Presbyterians are fond of quoting the first question and answer from the Shorter Catechism. "What is the chief end of [men and women]?" The chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.

But, how do we worship God?

Jesus tells us that it doesn't matter where we worship God or how we worship God. The important thing is that our worship be sincere, that we worship God in Spirit and in Truth. (John 5:24) That can mean a number of things, but for the woman at the well it meant telling the truth about her own life. It meant being honest about her very considerable shortcomings.

In fact, instead of trying to hide what everyone knew already, she used her weakness to tell others about Jesus. She went back into town at high noon and said to anyone who would listen,

"Come meet a man who told me everything that I have ever done, and believe me, I've done a lot. Could this man be the Messiah?"

It is human nature to avoid the painful parts of our life or to blame others for what has gone wrong. But, it seems to me that this whole passage is about having the courage to swim against that tide. What gives us the courage and the hope to do that?

JESUS CHANGES THE RULES

I would suggest that when it comes to the woman at the well it was her encounter with Jesus that made the difference. What Jesus did allowed the woman to enter a different world where the old rules no longer applied. What Jesus did allowed the woman to have the one thing her lifestyle would never let her have, hope.

Now she believed change was possible. She was beginning to believe that this strange man at the well just might be the Messiah.

Jesus is the one in this story who consistently acts in ways that are unexpected. In a world where Samaritans were to be avoided like the plague, Jesus made sure that his itinerary included Samaria.

In John 4:4 we read that Jesus "had to go through Samaria." That's not a minor statement about trip planning. That's a major statement about God's kingdom in which all are included, even enemies.

In a world where all women were considered to be second-class citizens, Jesus took time to talk with and care for a woman who was at the bottom of the heap.

It is the compassion of Jesus that enables an almost comic encounter between old enemies to become an act of salvation.

THE DISCIPLES MISUNDERSTAND

A kingdom based upon compassion was such a new and unexpected idea that even the disciples of Jesus don't know what to say or do in response to it.

And so the comic relief in the story now shifts to the disciples who return to the scene with food for Jesus. And Jesus tells them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." Jesus is once again speaking metaphorically, but the disciples don't get it. They wonder if he might have found a grocery store while they were gone. So Jesus spells it out. He said,

"My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work." Completing the work of his heavenly Father meant reaching out to those who were in need. Completing the work of his heavenly Father meant bringing water to a dry and thirsty land.

That's what being the Messiah meant for Jesus. It meant bringing the salvation of God to those who needed it most.

THE SAMARITANS BELIEVE

We know that the disciples won't get it for a long time. But, amazingly enough, the outsiders, the hated Samaritans did get it. When they heard the woman's testimony, they invited Jesus to stay, and he stayed for two days.

When I read this story I think about the fact that when Jesus preached in his home town of Nazareth, he was not well received. In fact they tried to kill him.

But, the preaching of Jesus in this town was well received. Many believed because they had a personal encounter with Jesus. They had an opportunity to bring the dry spot in their life to the source of living water.

And as Jesus left they said to the woman at the well, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." John 4:42 (NRSV)

SOMETHING TERRIBLE BRUSHED BY GOD'S GRACE

I have often thought about the fact that this is our job as witnesses to the salvation of God in Jesus Christ. We want to find a way for people to hear the gospel for themselves, to hear the good news of salvation in a personal way.

The love of God in Jesus is still a love so strong that it reaches out to heal the darkest part of our soul. The woman at the well found out that God in Jesus loved her so much that she didn't have to pretend any more. He told her everything she ever did, but he did it not to condemn her but to heal her.

I remember preaching a sermon on divorce several years ago. When I thought about that passage, I considered preaching on something else. After all, I knew that many of my members were divorced and what Jesus had to say on divorce was hard to understand and accept. But, somehow I felt that this was the sermon that needed to be preached that week.

Many people came up to me after the service and said, "I have never heard a sermon preached on that passage before. I'm divorced, and I've always wondered about that passage. Thank you for helping me to understand what Jesus said about divorce."

When something terrible in us gets brushed by the love of God, that's what we say, "Thank you." We say thank you Lord for reminding me that even the darkest part of my life is not too dark for the grace that is revealed in Your Son, Jesus. Thank you for reminding me that His living water can bring relief to even the driest part of my soul.

THINGS THAT DO NOT SATISFY

My father used to sing an anthem whenever there was a sermon on this passage. The first line went, "Like the woman at the well I thirsting for things that do not satisfy."

What about you? Are you thirsting for things that do not satisfy?

Like our Samaritan sister we sometimes struggle to believe. Our relationship with Jesus is sometimes almost a comic one. Like the comedy routine of George and Gracie, our communication with the Lord has not been very good. In fact, you could almost say it's as if we live in different worlds.

We are comfortable with the words of religion, but sometimes have trouble connecting those religious words with the presence of the living Lord.

We speak easily and often about salvation, but our actions show that we do not understand its source. Some of us even try to quantify it, not so much in buckets of water but in buckets of blessings that we can carry to the bank.

We have elevated self-analysis and self-development to an art form, but we still have trouble hearing the words of the one who can tell us everything we have ever done.

We make the family a substitute for salvation, and pretend that we have never heard of God's family, the church.

We are an odd couple, Jesus and I. We talk right past each other so often. It would be funny, if it weren't so sad.

SALVATION OUT OF MISUNDERSTANDING

But, even where the misunderstanding is greatest, salvation is closer than we think. We learn that the story of Jesus and us is a love story after all. But, it's not a boy meets girl kind of love story.

It's a human being meets God kind of love story.

And the stone that is rolled away is not a stone covering the top of a well but the stone covering the grave.

Long ago misunderstanding reached a fevered pitch. Jesus was crucified by people he loved. For those who expected the Messiah to come on a white war horse or a fiery chariot, this was the low point.

And on the cross this strange Messiah, the one who told the woman he was the source of living water cried out, "I thirst."

But his thirst is not assuaged. Instead they offer him something to take away the pain. He refuses. You see, he understood that it was his mission to take upon himself the pain of the world, our pain. And so he dies on that cross.

To make sure he is dead the Roman soldier pierces his side with a spear, and out flow blood and water.

Those who see it think that it is the last gasp of life that flows from his body. But, later, after three days, they see that this flow is indeed a flow of living water, the hope of salvation for this life and for the life to come.

John Donne, the poet, preacher and master of the double entendre concluded his final sermon with this sentence,

"There we leave you in that blessed dependency, to hang upon him who hangs upon the cross."

And that my friends is where we are left as well. We are left hanging with Jesus, the one who can tell us everything about the darkest, driest part of our life, and the one who has personally faced the worst that life has to offer.

That's what the season of Lent is all about. We, like the woman at the well are left to once again wonder about this Jesus. Could he be the Messiah? Could he be my Savior?

Hang around with Jesus these next few weeks. Let him into that that dark and dry side of your life. In not too many days, when the third day dawns, you will see what it all means.

In the most hilarious irony of all, the stone will once again be rolled away and the world will once again be filled with light and living water.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN