

Do Talk to Strangers!

[Text - John 4:5-30, 39-42]

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Even though the Gospel accounts routinely tell of Jesus teaching and reaching out to *multitudes* of people, they also tell stories of him interacting with specific individuals. One fascinating example of this is found in today's New Testament reading, where Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. This morning, I'd like us to look this encounter, focusing on three specific things that Jesus does to help bring about a remarkable change in this woman's life. My hope is that you and I will also find these three things helpful and inspiring for our own lives, and for the way in which you and I engage with other people.

It's noon when Jesus arrives at Jacob's well. By that time of day, the respectable people from town have already gotten their water during the cooler morning hours. So this is the ideal time for the "socially unacceptable" to take their turn. If you live in a hot climate, and want to avoid other people, high noon would be the perfect time to get your water, and avoid judgmental scrutiny. Yet on this particular day, this particular woman comes to the well only to find another person already sitting there. Fortunately, he's a stranger - some tired traveler she doesn't know, and who hopefully doesn't know about her; so maybe she can simply get her water in peace. But apparently this man's mother *wasn't* completely infallible - she didn't teach him *not* talk to strangers! So he initiates a conversation with this strange woman, asking her for a drink of water. It's a reasonable request, since he has no water container; and it's a request that common courtesy cannot refuse. So it looks like she's stuck.

From the man's accent and appearance, she realizes that he's Jewish, perhaps even a rabbi; which probably makes her even more nervous to be there. But there she is, and there he is, so why not just move it along. After all, he should be as uncomfortable as she - eager to get

his water, and get away from this unsavory, Samaritan. Yet strangely enough, he seems quite at ease with her, and in no hurry to leave.

The first thing we should note, is that Jesus gives this woman his full *attention*; which catches her by surprise. She asks him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” [“For the Jews have no dealings with Samaritans”, as the Gospel writer editorially explains.] Yet, apparently, Jesus isn’t put-off by the fact that she’s a Samaritan, or a woman, or that she has come to the well by herself at midday. Instead, he focuses his attention on the person in front of him - a child of God, who he has the privilege of meeting. He then engages her in a deep conversation about water, and *living* water; the history of Jacob’s well; and the deep inner thirsting that so many people experience.

Realizing that this man is actually willing to interact with her, the woman asks *him* for a drink - from that “fountain of living water”. In response, he invites her to open-up even further, saying, “Go call your husband and come back.” The woman admits, “I have no husband,” which Jesus apparently already knows. Perhaps her reputation has preceded her. Jesus says, “You have had *five* husbands, and the one whom you have now is not your husband!”

Well that’s certainly awkward! So the woman abruptly changes the subject with an insight of her own, that sounds rather formal, *and* almost funny: “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet!” And then she plunges into this theological discourse about the proper place and the correct way to worship - a rather obvious ploy to shift the conversation. Yet Jesus is right there with her! He continues to give her his complete *attention*; and by doing so, demonstrates a genuine *acceptance* of who she is and where she is in her life. No judgment; no words of condemnation; no pious withdrawing from this flawed, yet fascinating child of God.

This is the second notable thing that Jesus does in this encounter: He *accepts* this woman as she is. He respectfully listens to her understanding of faith, and her sincere questions concerning the true

nature of worship. *Acceptance* may be one of the most important things that you and I can offer to other people; and it's also one of the more difficult things to give. This is especially true when people are doing things with which we disagree, or things that we *know* aren't particularly good for them. Our natural response is to want to counsel, or criticize, or judge. Unfortunately, we Christians have a pretty good [or pretty *bad*] reputation for doing this! Yet Jesus Christ clearly teaches that we should *not* judge others; and more significantly, Jesus himself does not judge. He is *truthful* with this woman; yet he doesn't even begin to criticize her, or to shame her. Instead, he affirms her as a genuine child of God - one who is worthy to receive that Divine Living Water!

Imagine how radically different this encounter with Jesus must have been for that Samaritan woman. She is so used to being put-down and shunned by her own community, that she probably can only see herself through their judgmental eyes. But then, she meets this truly Holy and Gracious individual, who pays attention to her, and who accepts her right where she is! And rather than adding to her problems and negative self-image, he lifts-up the marvelous possibilities that he sees within her.

By giving her his complete *attention* and *acceptance*, Jesus shares with her a third Life-changing gift: the gift of *appreciation*. By seeing her as a completely loved child of God, Jesus helps her to see herself in that exact same light - as one no longer trapped or defined by her heritage or past history - but as a valued and appreciated member of God's All-Inclusive Family. And so a remarkable transformation begins, as this woman realizes that she truly *is* a child of God - one who can worship God "in spirit and in truth" - and one who can't wait to tell others about this extraordinary, Life-changing encounter.

So she leaves her water jar and hurries back to the city, to boldly and joyfully invite others to “come and see this person who told me *everything* I have ever done.” [“Really, *everything*? Well, that’s certainly worth going to see!”] So they eagerly follow her back to the well, and come to meet Jesus. “And many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of this woman's testimony.” How about that! Because of her amazing encounter with Jesus Christ, this woman’s life is completely changed: from being the city’s disreputable outcast, to becoming an important part of that community - a community which itself is transformed, as those people also meet Jesus and welcome him to stay with them.

So...what does all this have to do with *our* community today? It reminds us that as a community of faith, you and I have the awesome opportunity to help change people’s lives - to “open up the faucet” and allow that fountain of Living Water to spring forth with new life and new possibilities. The way we do this, is by faithfully following the example of Jesus Christ:

By paying *attention* to the people we encounter. By really seeing them for who they are, and listening to what they have to say.

By *affirming* them where they are - not judging their past, but welcoming their *presence*, and raising-up their potential.

And as we do this, you and I convey to them the gift of *appreciation*. We see their genuine value as children of God, and we embrace them with the life-changing power of Divine love and grace.

One of the great benefits that comes when we do this, is that the more you and I look for the goodness and potential in others, the more that goodness and potential blossoms in our own lives. That’s the wonderful dynamic of this Life-changing process: that once the process begins, the more it will grow and deepen, multiply and spread throughout our entire community. Once the Life-giving Water of the Spirit really starts to flow, the impact will be immeasurable!

By paying *attention* to one woman, by *accepting* her for who she is, and by *appreciating* who she can truly be, Jesus inspires her to completely change her life for the better. And then, this highly unlikely

individual becomes the first Christian missionary of record - as she joyfully shares the Good News with her neighbors, her friends, and even her detractors! She does this in a way that is so easy and natural, that any child of God can do it - including you and me. We simply invites others to “come and see” for themselves - to come and meet this marvelous Messiah, who lives and works in and through this welcoming Family of Faith. Because once people meet him, their deepest thirst *is* quenched, and their entire lives are truly transformed.