

Woman at the Well

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ. What a wonderful Gospel we have in front of us this morning. It's a Gospel which shows Jesus taking not an easy path but a very unconventional one. This path was to confront people where they were and through his actions produce change. The Gospel is usually referred to as "the Woman at the Well". Unnamed/ Unwanted/anonymous. Let's take a look at this tremendous Gospel.

First - the issue that the unnamed woman comes from a Samaritan city. Samaria was a territory just north of Judea. It was a territory that most Jews would avoid at all costs. Why? It had to do with prejudice! Hundreds of years before the Jewish nation was occupied by Babylon and the Jews were deported. The only ones who were not deported were the Samaritans. The Babylonians needed someone to do the work. These Samaritans remained in their own homes, kept their businesses, enjoyed employment at the vacated jobs of the exiled Jews, intermarried with the Babylonians and basically did not suffer at all during the Babylonian conquest. An intense hatred developed between mainline Jews and the Samaritans. By the time of Jesus all contact with them was to be avoided even the spoken word. Prejudice is always without logic. The people of Jesus's day were 10 generations removed from the source of the conflict, but that's prejudice. Think about Northern and Southern Ireland, or India/Pakistan or Johannesburg or the Oneida Nation. Opps- there's a Samaritan. They smell bad, they drink, don't go there at night. Jesus says not in my house. He talks with her. My mission is to defeat prejudice.

The other issue in this Gospel has to do with women in general. The world of Jesus was one of a male dominated society. Women were considered property of men. They did not eat with men but ate standing while serving the men. They kept at a distance from men on the streets and were restricted to certain areas of the temple for worship. It was called the Court of the Women. It was almost unheard of to initiate a conversation with a woman in public. Divorce was frowned upon, but here again only for the woman. A man could write a letter of divorce to his wife if she burned his meal and of course if he paid enough shekels to the rabbi. Pre- annulment. A divorced woman had two options- beg or become

a prostitute. And a rabbi did not converse with a prostitute. Another reason what Jesus did was remarkable.

That's the setting- the Sitz in Leban. Now let's look at the Gospel.

Even here Jesus breaks through all of the prejudices of the day by initiating a conversation. He believed that all people were God's children - that's why he was criticized so much. The first words which were spoken to the woman were words of promise and not words of judgment. He gave her an invitation which did not demand a check-up.

"Woman, if you only knew how much God has to give and How much he wants to give it and who I am for you, all you would have to do is to ask and I would give you water to make you alive. If you have it you will be satisfied forever because the water will be inside you..."

Wow. That's for us- Right?

Except, like the woman, we believe that before God gives us anything we have to shape up first. Get it all together and then God gives us something. Jesus says NO - Grace without reservation. He simply said to the woman - and to us- I have something for you. If you have it, it will make a change in your life. Jesus gives first and then we change.

But it didn't work for the woman - at least not yet. She wasn't used to this approach. She was used to the shape up method and unfortunately that is also true for many of us.

My father born in the Holy Land - Norway. While they win many medals in the Winter Olympics, when my father grew up, their theology was suspect. He was taught that before he received communion, he had to be good enough. Never took communion when I grew up. Only later when he was quite ill did he understand grace without reservation.

The woman couldn't understand the concept, so Jesus gets personal. He lets her know that he knows everything about her. He know about her 5 husbands and the fact that she was living with someone who was not her husband. Liz Taylor in the 1st century. Wow. The woman couldn't figure that out. I mean, Jesus didn't

look like a gossip. She avoided Gossips. That's why she went to get water at Noon. *Congregational Input. How hot was it at Noon? Who else was there?*

So now the woman, completely flummoxed, decides to change the subject. She decides to ask a religious question. We do the same thing. When all else fails, we get intellectual.

"What is the true faith? Yours or mine?"

The woman is following in the steps of millions of people who want to get their lives together. Is the right religion the ELCA? Or maybe Christ the Rock, or Calvary Bible or the church of what's happening now? Which is the right one.

Charlie Brown comes to Lucy in the psychiatric booth and pays his 10 cents. "I need direction", he says. "Charlie," says Lucy, "life is like a cruise ship. Some people put their deck chairs on the rear of the ship to see where they came from. Others put the deck chair on the front of the ship seeing where they are going. Which way do you put your deck chair, Charlie?" He says, "I've never been able to get mine unfolded."

Jesus cuts through the garbage and says the question is not what you should do on a particular mountain - meaning forget about the right church and deal with the question of who God is and what he does for us. God is our God who encourages us to be accepting not practicing judgment and prejudice. Inclusive not exclusive. He is a God who touches us with his love and grace. He doesn't ask us to shape up before we are accepted. Rather, we are accepted and then we shape up.

The issue is not that we find God, but that God has found us. In spite of ourselves. Just open the deck chair and feel God's love. The woman got the message - now for God's sake- can we?

Amen- Let it be so.

