Sunday, July 16, 1972
AT THE CROSSROADS(The Woman at the Well)
John 4:5-26 (12) 1, 21, 68

Jesus often met people at the crossroads, in the marketplace, or out walking. He was continually corning into contact with persons who would not ordinarily be found in the churches of his time. He met people in the ordinary routines of life, and these became the context for ministry.

We have just read about such a meeting in our scripture lesson. Jesus and his disciples had been traveling all morning and were tired, thirsty, and hungry. Coming to a well, a natural resting place, they had stopped, and the disciples had gone into town to buy food for the group.

While Jesus rested and waited at the well at the edge of town, a Samaritan woman came to get water. This in itself was unusual, for the natural time to draw water was in the cool of the evening. It was then that all of the women at the village gathered about the well and as they got their water, they heard and told the latest news. It was a kind of social event along with the routine.

But why did this Samaritan woman come at a different time? Perhaps her whole life was disorderly and disorganized, even to the point of the routine of coming to get water. Or maybe her unsavory reputation had made her unpopular and so the other women pointedly ignored her, and rather than be slighted and publicly ostracized, she had formed the habit of slipping out to the well at a time when it was reasonably certain no other person would be there. To miss the exchanges of friendly conversation seems to indicate some kind of rupture in her relationship with the other women of the village.

But on this day, it was different. She met Jesus at the well. He opened the conversation by asking her to give him a drink. At first the woman was surprised by this request. She asked, “How is it that you a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”

She was shocked on two accounts: first that Jewish man would speak to her — for the Jews and the Samaritans had no dealings with each other; and second, because she was a woman and, in those days, men did not ordinarily speak with women they did not know. Furthermore, she felt herself not accepted by others. She was an outcast in her own community and was now surprised that anyone would treat her as a human being.

We know from other incidents in the New Testament that Jesus was never one to cast out any person. He accepted each person as he or she was and treated each individual as a fellow human being.

And Jesus even did more than that. He was sensitive to other people and their problems. He was a good listener. Thus, even with his brief conversation with the Samaritan woman, he sensed her feelings, the lack in her life, the emptiness, and the search for meaning.

Using the symbolism of water, Jesus said to the woman that although she was able to give him water and satisfy his thirst, it was really she who needed water. She needed, Jesus said, living water. Her life needed to be changed. It needed to be filled!

But the woman didn't understand what Jesus was saying to her or maybe she really did understand but carried on the conversation as if she didn't know what he was talking about. We've all done that, and we've had it done to us. An inuendo is made and we pass it over. We go on talking as if we hadn't heard the subtlety at all.

Thus, the Samaritan woman went on at least outwardly assuming that Jesus was talking about the kind of water which satisfies physical thirst and she pointed out to him that he could give her no water of any kind since he had no container for water.

Yet she was intrigued by Jesus'comments, so she asked, "Where do you get the flowing water you are talking about? Do you think you are greater than Jacob who gave us this well many years ago?" Her Samaritan pride was outraged by the suggestion that a Jew could produce flowing water at the place where the patriarch Jacob had been compelled to sink a deep well in order to provide water for his family and animals.

But Jesus wasn't sidetracked by her reply. He continued with his conversation about water and went on to say that the water he was talking about was a special kind and that if she had it, she would no longer be thirsty.

Now the woman became very interested, but if she understood the deeper meaning of the conversation, she didn't let on. Instead, she gave Jesus a kind of double answer. "Give me this kind of water so that I may no longer thirst or have to bother to come here to the well to get water each day."

Again, Jesus listened to her feelings and longings beneath her words. He knew she was searching. She in effect had said, "Give me this water that I need not keep corning in this dreary drudgery day after day. And give me that deeper kind of water you are talking about that my life may again have some joy and meaning to it." In her jaded face, Jesus could read these unspoken words, "I am tired of being a social outcast. I pretend to be satisfied, but deep down I know that this is no more than a living death. Where is the new life that you offer me?"

Have you met persons like the woman of Samaria? Outwardly they appear happy, but on closer examination one can see the lines of cynicism on their faces. They rarely smile. They cannot sleep peacefully even with the help of drugs. They have squeezed the world dry of its pleasures, but none seems to satisfy.

The story of the woman of Samaria can be the story of any one of us. It is the story of you or me when our life is characterized by an inner emptiness, by a vacuum, by a lack of any real and lasting meaning at the very center of our living.

All human beings have a will, a drive to find meaning in our living, to make some sense out of life, to have some kind of direction in our living. This is one of the basic drives of all persons.

Thus, deep down, we like the Samaritan woman, want to find the kind of living water that will satisfy this thirst, and yet on the other hand we are often unwilling to face the problems within ourselves, or change our ways, or give up some things in order to have the "living water."

Do we really want to throw away some of the crutches we used for so long, or the excuses we have hidden behind?

Jesus recognized this in the woman of Samaria. She wanted help, and yet she wasn't sure if she wanted to face the problem openly. Thus, Jesus said to her, "Go call your husband and have him come here also." She answered honestly enough as far as she went for she said, "I have no husband." But Jesus didn't leave the issue there. "You are right in saying that you have no husband for you have had five husbands, and the man you are now living with is not your husband."

The woman had been brought up sharply against the facts of her own life; facts which were unpleasant for her to admit.

I suppose it would be possible to try to excuse this woman's life in terms of early forces in her life, in terms of her upbringing or other factors. We know how often we like to do this. We readily find some kind of an explanation for our behavior in an attempt to excuse our behavior. And of course, there are conditioning factors which partially explain what we do and how we act and what we are afraid of and not afraid of. But it's always only a partial explanation.

To deal with conditioning factors is to deal with only one part of the total picture. Another decisive factor in what we are and what we become and what we do, does not lie in the conditions which surround us — but in our response to the conditions. We have the freedom to take a stand one way or another toward conditions. We are responsible as persons for how we handle the conditions which life presents to us. If we are in darkness, we can either light a candle or curse the darkness.

Certainly, we have to try always to be changing the con-ditions which adversely affect us and others, but at the same time we cannot go through life blaming everything that happens to us or all of our behavior, on the conditions of our life.

Thus, the directness with which Jesus confronted the Samaritan woman with her immorality reminds us that some human problems are also the result of irresponsible action on our part and are not to be simply explained away as the result of forces operating upon us. We are more than puppets dancing on the ends of strings which somebody else is pulling. Flip Wilson's character of Geraldine likes to say, "The devil made me do it!" But we always have the freedom to tell the devil either no or yes.

We are in danger of overlooking the most human aspect of life if we fail to hold persons as accountable and responsible for their actions in the present and in the future. God has not made us as slaves to the forces around us. We can decide one way or another. And conscious decision with a definite goal in mind can break the circle of behavior dictated by past conditioning.

Life can be pulled by goals which we consciously and deliberately choose, just as surely as it can be pushed by forces over which we feel we have no control.

But the goals need to be adequate ones. Thus, in this case with the Samaritan woman, Jesus tried to help her see the futility of finding happiness simply through the doorway of having one man and then another. She had been trying to fill the vacuum in her life with his kind of behavior. Jesus did not hesitate to make an issue of the matter.

Over and over again in his ministry, Jesus underscored the folly of making an ultimate goal that which is only a byproduct of more significant goals. Pleasure comes not by seeking it but by finding satisfaction in filling one's responsible place in life.

The reaction of the Samaritan woman to being confronted with the moral problem in her life is highly instructive. As she began to feel that things were growing much too searching, too personal, too uncomfortable, her first re-sponse was to try to change the subject with a bit of flattery thrown in. She tried to escape her own personal problem by starting a theological discussion of more abstract matters.

“Sir,” she said, “I perceive that you are a prophet. Now if you are such a religious expert, help me settle this problem. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain; but you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where persons ought to worship.” This had been an old argument between the Samaritans and the Jews. So, the Samaritan woman undoubtedly expected Jesus to answer her that Jerusalem was the proper place to worship.

For us too it is often quite common to use an abstract theological discussion as a way of defending ourselves from ever discussing things which affect us more personally. We like to debate various theories and points of religion. However, religious discussion of this kind can be a way of avoiding the deeper and more real issues.

The Samaritan woman’s reference to the appropriate place to worship, although a timely and interesting question, could not help her toward solving her own personal problem, and making a definite decision in her life.

At the same time, however, the question underneath also showed a deep concern within her about where persons ought to go to seek God’s help and forgiveness, so it was not an entirely unrelated concern. She was also inquiring in a roundabout way whether or not God was really a loving and forgiving God. She was asking for something almost without knowing it. And again, Jesus being a sensitive and listening person, was aware of the deeper concern in her life, but he wasn’t sidetracked by dealing only with the surface question.

At the same time, Jesus did not respond in a defensive fashion by saying, “You Samaritans have it all wrong! Only we Jews have the right place and the right way to worship.” Rather he accepted her and her question without offense, and yet refused to be drawn into an argument with her about the matter.

What he did was to take the topic of conversation offered to him and moved it into a deeper level; into an area of personal relevance for her. He said in effect, “You are seeking God and wanting to worship him and more than that, God is also seeking you. God is not interested in whether you worship him on this mountain or in Jerusalem. God cannot be localized in any one place or another or in any one form of worship or another. God is a spirit and they that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.”

By this time, the Samaritan woman could see that Jesus was interested in her as a person and that through him, God was interested in her. The inner vacuum in her life was beginning to be filled. It’s amazing how we can begin to see life in a new way through our contact with some persons. She even forgot her original errand of drawing water.

She had the courage now to at least begin to face the truth about herself and her life. More courageously still, she turned from Jesus’presence and ran into the town, calling out to the very people who had despised and snubbed her, “Come and see a man who told me all that I ever did.”

Do such things still happen? I believe they do! I know they do! This story is also our story. Jesus still meets people at the cross-roads. He meets people through the way we meet people. That strange power of God works through all who are sensitive and helpful. And this can happen anywhere, anytime. Amen.