Book 4 Sunday March 16, 1975

"JESUS AND THE WOMAN AT THE WELL" John 4:5-26

Jesus often met people at the crossroads and in the marketplace. He was continually coming into contact with persons who would not ordinarily be found in the churches of his time. And for that he was often criticized. Such is the case with the woman he met at Jacob's Well.

Jesus and his disciples had been traveling all morning and came at noontime to this particular well. They were tired, hungry and thirsty. It was a natural resting place. While Jesus rested, the disciples went into the nearby town to buy food.

While Jesus was waiting at the well, a Samaritan woman came to get water. This in itself was unusual, for the natural time to get water was in the evening. It was then that all of the women of the village gathered at the well and as they got their water they heard and told the latest news.

So why did this Samaritan woman come at a different time? She had a bad reputation in town and so the other women usually ignored her and rather than be slighted and publicly ostracized, she had formed the habit of coming to the well at a time when other people would not be there.

But today it was different. Jesus was at the well and he opened the conversation by asking her to give him a drink. The woman was surprised by this request. "How is it," she asked, "that you a Jew ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

She was shocked on two accounts: first that a Jewish man would speak to her at all, for the Jews and Samaritans had no dealings with one another: and second because she was a woman and in those days men did not ordinarily speak with women they did not know. Furthermore, since she was a kind of outcast in her own community, she was surprised that anyone would treat her with respect.

But Jesus did even more than that. He was sensitive to people and their problems and a good listener. So in the opening conversation with the Samaritan woman, he sensed an emptiness in her life.

Using the symbolism of water, Jesus said to the woman that although she was able to give him water and satisfy his

physical thirst, it was really she who needed water of a different kind, living water and that he could provide it for her.

But the woman didn't understand what Jesus was saying to her, or if she did, she didn't let on. We've all done that. An inuendo is made and we pass it over. We go on talking as if we hadn't heard what was meant beneath the words.

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

Furthermore, Jesus had implied that he could give her living water and she asked, "Where do you get the kind of 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.

Jesus, however, was not sidetracked by her reply. He continued with his analogy and symbolism of water and went on to say that the water he was talking about was of a different nature and that if she had it, her whole life would be changed.

Now the woman became very interested, but if she understood what he was talking about, she didn't let on. Instead she gave him a kind of double answer. "Give me this kind of water," she said, "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 beneath her words. He knew that she was searching. He heard her saying--"I am tired of my kind of life, tired of living with different men, tired of adultery, tired of being a social outcast. I pretend to be satisfied, but deep down I know that this is no more than living death. Where is the real life that you offer me?" (I'm thirsty in some way than you know.)

We've all met people like the woman of Samaria. Outwardly they appear satisfied, but on closer examination they are unhappy and lonely but have never said it plainly to anyone.

The story of the woman of Samaria can be the story of any one of us. It is our story when our lives are characterized by an inner emptiness, a vacuum, by a lack of meaning at the very center of our living.

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

Jesus recognized this in the Samaritan woman. 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. He said, "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."

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

Now it would be possible to excuse this woman's way of life in terms of various kinds of influences on her. We know how well we like to do this. It's not too difficult to find some kind of explanation for our behavior in psychological or sociological conditioning in an attempt to excuse our behavior. We say, "I came from a broken home," or "I was brought up in a bad neighborhood." or the school I went to was deficient." And of course there are some conditioning factors which influence our behavior and our decisions, but only in part.

What we are and what we become does not lie totally in the conditions which surround us. In fact often the determining factor is to be found in our personal response to the conditions. We have a freedom to take a stand one way or another. 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 conditions which adversely affect us and others, but at the same time we cannot go through life blaming everything that happens to us on the conditions of our life.

Thus the directness with which Jesus confronted the Samaritan woman with her immoraility 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 on us.

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 the 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 such behavior. And Jesus did not hesitate to make an issue of the matter.

The reaction of the Samaritan woman when she was confronted with the moral problem in her life is instructive. As she began to feel that things were growing much too searching and uncomfortable, her first response was the change the subject with a bit of flattery thrown in. She tried cleverly to escape her own personal problem by starting a theological discussion.

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

For us too, it is quite common to use an abstract religious 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 discussions of this kind can be a way of avoiding the real issue.

The Samaritan woman's reference to the appropiate place for worship, although an interesting question, could not

help her toward solving her own personal problem. At the same time, however, the question underneath also showed a deep concern within her about where people ought to go to God to find forgiveness and new life. She was also inquiring in a round-about-way whether or not God was a loving and forgiving God.

Jesus, being the sensitive and listening person that he was, picked up her deeper question and moved it to another level. He in effect said to her, "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. The inner vacuum in her life was beginning to be filled. She was gaining the courage to face the truth about herself.

In the meeting with Jesus, the Samaritan woman made a journey from legalism to authenticity. She went through a transformation in her life and in her perception of life.

This transformation made her the second woman missionary for Jesus. She left what she was doing and went to bring the people of the city to Jesus. And when the people she had known saw the change in her because of her meeting with Jesus, they too began to believe.

This meeting with the woman of Samaria tells us several things about Jesus and his ministry which are instructive for us in our dealings with people.

1. First, note that Jesus broke through the prejudices of his day to talk with the woman. The law of that time decreed, "A man should hold no conversation with a woman in the streets, not even with his own wife, lest men should gossip." Jesus, however, was not limited by the customs of his day in his approach to life, and he addressed the woman as an equal, a potential sharer in the kingdom of God. He recognized her intelligence, her eagerness for the water of eternal life and her ability as a communicator of the good news.

2. Secondly, Jesus didn't preach at the woman. He related to her life. Het met her where she was and then showed her where she could be.

This whole story is about the renewal of life. The Samaritan woman discovered that when she was willing to turn from her past a whole new life and purpose opened up for her.

Such things still happen today. We may be the ones who help another person find new life, or it may be that someone will help us in a quite unexpected way to find new life. It can even happen in a chance encounter. Amen.