

(Let us pray: “Lord, we come with willing hearts and minds to this moment in our worship service – we come hoping that the words about to be shared in response to your word might be the words we need today to prepare us for our living out the faith in the coming week. Work your healing touch for we come to you in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son and our Lord. Amen.”)

### **Those People Too, Lord?**

John 4:5-42

February 24, 2008

Well, I have to admit to you this morning that this was one of those weeks when more than one sermon was born in my gut out of today’s text. There are just so many parts that beg for attention – for interpretation.

There was this woman – this Samaritan woman – who had been married five times and was currently living with a man who was not her husband. The townies considered her to be a loose woman – a slut. She was despised, talked about, and criticized wherever she went.

One day she went to the community drinking hole around noon to draw water. It is assumed that she went at that time to avoid the rest of the community who tended to draw their water in the coolness of the morning. And at the community drinking well she ran into a Jewish man – Jesus. He was traveling through Samaria because he was in a hurry to get to Galilee and out of Judea and the route through Samaria was the shortest route.

Jews in that day tried not to travel through Samaria if they could help it. There wasn’t any love between the two sects. Most scholars believe it went back to the days when their country was invaded, almost 700 years earlier, and those who remained, the Samaritans, married those from other countries that moved in. They didn’t consider their intermarrying an issue because they believed their own people were never returning.

The Jewish people didn’t see it that way. They considered intermarriage to be an unforgivable sin and wouldn’t have anything to do with the Samaritans as a result. They considered the Samaritans social outcasts - untouchables, racially inferior, practicing a false religion - and would do everything possible to avoid coming into contact with them – even if it meant adding days to their journey by routing themselves around the territory of Samaria which lay between the northern part of Palestine known as Galilee and the southern territory of Judea.

The split was further widened when the Samaritans built a temple at Mt. Gerizim for their worship. The Jews held that the only true place of worship was the temple in Jerusalem. Both groups considered themselves the true descendants of the nation of Israel. So, you get a bit of the picture of why it was unusual for Jesus and his disciples to be passing through.

Now, the reason Jesus and his disciples were traveling from Judea to Galilee was that some controversy had apparently surfaced concerning Jesus’ disciples baptizing and they had to get out of Judea.

O.K., so Jesus stopped outside of Synchar at the well while his disciples went into the town to buy some lunch. And, while he was sitting by the well, this unnamed Samaritan woman approached to draw water. Oh my, the awkwardness – a woman – a Samaritan woman – and a Jewish man. It was taboo for a man to be seen in public with a woman and unthinkable for a rabbi to speak to a woman in public. Again, she probably went at that time

of day so she wouldn't have to put up with the sneers, looks, or comments of others. It was a lonely and rejected woman that approached the well at noon that day.

There's another significant reason the author of the Gospel of John noted that the encounter happened around noon and that is to make sure we understand that it was a thirsty Jesus that was hanging around the well. He needed something to drink and had nothing with which to draw water from the well. The Samaritan woman had to have paused for a brief moment when she saw this Jewish man by the well, not only because he was a Jew but also because of her own unacceptability as a woman and as a Samaritan. But her own need for water apparently outweighed any concern she had with the chance encounter.

And Jesus said to her: "Give me something to drink." It wasn't a request: "Would you draw me some water?" It was almost an order – probably not in a demanding voice – but still with the expectation of having his need met.

The thoughts that had to have raced through her mind – the thoughts that had to have raced through the minds of anyone who heard the story in that day - had to have been ones of bewilderment. "What in the world was he doing?" – "Talking to a woman?" – "Talking to a Samaritan woman?" – "Talking to this kind of Samaritan woman?"

Now the woman also had to have observed that he had nothing with which to draw water from the 100' well and that he was indeed thirsty. Yet again, probably because of the circumstances, her being a woman and a Samaritan and he being a man, a Jewish one at that, she had to ask: "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" Even with her overworked inferiority complex, there had to be a snideness in her voice: "Oh, look at big Mr. Jew, asking me – lowly Samaritan that I am, woman that I am – for a drink." Her first observation of Jesus – her first understanding of Jesus was as a Jew – as a man with a label. And she pigeon-holed him as someone who had to be really desperate not to deal with her with the same ethnic, gender tags that the rest of society used to determine whether persons should be approached given the time of day. The barriers which were normally in place seemed not to exist and she thought it strange enough to inquire about it.

And Jesus' response was: "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." Can you imagine the feelings that rushed into her then? Here sat a man without a bucket – there was no stream close by from which to draw "living water" which was how they referred to water which flowed in a stream – and he referenced living water. It may have crossed her mind that scripture reference to the Lord being the source of living water but she wasn't sure and so her retort was almost sarcastic, although perhaps with a beginning note of recognition: "Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our Father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

And the conversation deepened and the conversion was on. Then followed the conversations about her relationship with men and about worship. When the disciples returned from town they arrived just in time to see her rushing from the well toward the town and they probably started questioning what was going on between the two of them, although not out loud.

The result of this woman's encounter with Jesus at the well was that she became an evangelist. She went to her neighbors – those that had sat in judgment of her – those who knew all about her questionable past – the town

gossips – the town pious – and invited them to “Come and see.” Oh, her faith wasn’t yet fully developed, but she knew that her encounter with this man meant that her attitude about herself could be different. He accepted her. He didn’t treat her as an object, a possession to be used to satisfy his own desires. He treated her as a person. She felt the living water flow through her, cleansing her, healing her even though she didn’t fully understand what was happening.

Tom is a minister in a very large church. One of the things he does every month is he goes down to the homeless shelter in his city to work in their soup kitchen. After all the homeless have been fed, he invites them to the chapel at the shelter for a short communion service. He just thinks it’s appropriate after sharing soup together in the soup kitchen to share the bread and cup together at the altar.

One of those times, as he was walking down the rail serving the bread and juice, one of the men kneeling there looked like he had been out on the streets for a very long time. When Tom got to him, the man looked up at Tom and whispered: “Skip me.”

“What? Pardon me?” Tom asked.

In a somewhat louder voice, the man said again, “Skip me.” “Why?” asked Tom.

The man said, “Because I’m not worthy.”

Out of Tom’s mouth came, “Neither am I.” And then he added, “I’ll tell you what. I’m going to serve communion to these other people. Then, I’m going to come back and serve communion to you and then I would like you to serve it to me.”

The man blinked and said to Tom: “Father, is that legal?” “Yes, it’s legal and that’s what we’re going to do,” Tom answered.

And so, Tom proceeded down the line and served all the other people kneeling there ... and then he went back to the man who was reluctant to receive the elements and he said: “What’s your name?”

And the man said, “Josh.”

And Tom placed the elements of the holy meal in front of him and said, “Josh, here is the Body of Christ and here is the Blood of Christ given for you. Eat this and drink this in remembrance that Christ came for you and Christ died for you. Amen.”

Josh blinked back the tears in his eyes ... and he received Holy Communion. Then, Tom knelt and handed Josh the trays of bread and wine and said: “Now, you serve me.”

Josh nervously took the trays and again asked: “Father, are you sure this is legal?”

“Yes, it’s legal. Just do it,” Tom answered.

“Josh’s eyes were darting from side to side as he looked over this shoulder and then the other ... as if he expected (at any moment) the police, the FBI, the CIA or the Pope to come rushing in to arrest him.

“Finally, he held the trays before Tom and as Tom received the sacrament, Josh muttered: “Body – Blood – for you, hang in there!”

Tom later said: “Of all the communion rituals I have ever heard, I don’t recall the words ‘Hang in there’ in any of them ... but at that moment for me, Holy Communion had never been more ‘Holy.’”

And Josh walked out of the homeless shelter that day with an extra ‘spring in his step,’ and it is reported that he went everywhere saying: “You won’t believe what I did today.” In fact, the story became so widespread that from that day on Josh became known on the streets as ‘The Rev.’”<sup>1</sup>

The Samaritan woman so stirred up the people in her hometown that they rushed out to the well and when Jesus saw the throng coming he said to his disciples: “You say that there are four months left until the harvest. I say to you lift up your eyes and see that the fields are white unto harvest.” Jesus was saying to those twelve and to us, “do not draw boundaries around the kingdom of God. Don’t limit its scope. No people, no race, no gender, no sinner is exempt from God’s grace. The time is now and the people are all around.”<sup>2</sup>

“Those people, too, Lord?” Yes, even the Samaritan woman – even the slut on the corner – even the gossiping neighbor – even the racist coworker – even the rich neighbors with their multi-million dollar homes – even those standing on our street corners seeking a handout – even those who spend way too many hours in the local bar - even those who spend hours chatting or reading in the neighborhood coffee pouring joints that populate our area – even those anti-war and pro-war activists who stand on the corner of North Broadway and High on Saturday mornings – even those who hold different political views than the norm – even those vegetarians and meat-lovers – even those Presbyterians and those atheists and Catholics and fundamentalists – even those ... “those people, too, Lord?” we want to ask. And the Lord’s answer comes thundering back from the well outside of Synchar, “Yes, even those that make you the most uncomfortable, even those you hate, all are welcome at my table – all are invited to be part of the kingdom – all are given grace.”

Let us pray.

1. James W. Moore, “Encounters With Christ IV: Jesus and the Woman at the Well,” Encounters with Christ (ChristianGlobe Network, Inc., 2001), 0-0000-0000-15.
2. Brett Blair and Staff, “Living Water for a Thirsty Soul,” Collected Sermons (ChristianGlobe Network, 2005), 0-000-000-001.

I wasn’t kidding when I said that I had a lot of sermon ideas for this week. I just couldn’t get them all in and so I’ve prepared a handout for those who might be interested in some of those other thoughts from other sermons. It’s on the same table out in the lobby as the one that has the Financial Picture handout that we used after church on Sunday, February 3<sup>rd</sup>. Feel free to pick both of them up. And I’ll post these quotes from other sermons on the website following this Sunday’s sermon as well.

## **Unused Sermon Illustrations for Sunday, February 24, 2008**

It's called prevenient grace or amazing grace.

“Some years ago in another state, there was a fellow named Roy (this is another true story about a friend of James W. Moore's – Moore was actually along for the ride on this one). Roy was going through a tough time. His daughter was having a hard time growing up. She had become surly and rebellious and arrogant and difficult. It was one crisis after another with her. She was constantly in trouble, but Roy never wavered. He kept on praying that she would some day soon “get her act together” and he kept on loving her and forgiving her.

“When she was sixteen, she ran away from home. All kinds of hurtful reports came back about the lifestyle she was living, but nobody could pinpoint exactly where she was. Finally, Roy got word that somebody had seen her in Memphis, Tennessee. Roy went to look for her.

“The person that reported this story said, ‘I'll never forget that experience...or the look on Roy's face as we searched all day and into the night for his prodigal daughter. Written large on his face was this look of intense urgency and deep love...as we went into one dive after another, one bar after another, one teenage hangout after another, and everywhere we went, Roy would do the same thing. He would show people the picture of his daughter and ask if anyone had seen her. No luck! They either hadn't seen her or they weren't talking. And everywhere we went that day, Roy stuck a picture of his wife and himself near the door. With it was a note, which read: ‘Debbie, all is forgiven! We love you! Please come home!’ (Signed) Mom and Dad.

“We didn't find Debbie that day, but two weeks later she did come home, dirty, disheveled, hungry, but O.K. She said: ‘I couldn't believe my eyes. I walked into this bar one night...and saw my mom and dad's picture and that note. And then, I went to another place and another and another... and everywhere I went, there was my mom and dad's picture...and that note forgiving me and pleading with me to come home...and for the first time in my life, I realized that night how much my mom and dad love me. I have hurt them so many times...I have broken their hearts so many times...and still they came looking for me...still they love me.’

“Where did Roy and his wife learn to love like that, to reach out like that to forgive like that? You know, don't you? They learned it from Jesus...the One who said to the woman at the well: ‘I know all about you. I know about your sins. I know about your past. I know about your sordid reputation...and I still love you, I still value you, I still care about you, I still forgive you and I want to help you make a new start with your life.’” (James W. Moore, “Encounters with Christ IV: Jesus and the Woman at the Well,” Encounters with Christ (ChristianGlobe Network, Inc., 2001), 0-0000-0000-15.)

“One of the commencement traditions at Harvard University is Senior Class Chapel. On the morning of graduation, seniors gather in Memorial Church to hear the

minister offer words of solace and encouragement as they leave ‘the Yard’ to take their places in the world.

“The 1998 senior class heard the unvarnished truth from the Rev. Peter Gomes, minister at Harvard and the author of several books on the Bible, including The Good Book and Sermons. In his gentle ringing tones, that call to mind a cross between a Shakespearean actor and the TV sitcom character Frasier, the inimitable Doctor Gomes took no prisoners as he began: ‘You are going to be sent out of here for good, and most of you aren’t ready to go. The president is about to bid you into the fellowship of educated men and women and, ‘ – and here he paused and spoke each word slowly for emphasis – ‘you know just how – dumb – you – really – are.’

“The senior class cheered in agreement.

“‘And worse than that,’ Doctor Gomes continued, ‘the world – and your parents in particular – are going to expect that you will be among the brightest and best. But you know that you can no longer fool all the people even some of the time. By noontime today, you will be out of here. By tomorrow you will be history. By Saturday, you will be toast. That’s a fact – no exceptions, no extensions.’

“‘Nevertheless, there is reason to hope,’ Doctor Gomes promised. ‘The future is God’s gift to you. God will not let you stumble or fall. God has not brought you this far to this place to abandon you or leave you here alone and afraid. The God of Israel never stumbles, never sleeps, never goes on sabbatical. Thus, my beloved and bewildered young friends, do not be afraid.’

“‘What Doctor Gomes did for the senior class at Harvard, Jesus does for the woman at the well.’ (Brett Blair and Staff, “Living Water for a Thirsty Soul,” Collected Sermons (ChristianGlobe Network, 2005), 0-000-000-01.)

“‘The woman replies: ‘I have no husband.’ Now listen. She’s honest. She doesn’t try to hide her immoral behavior. She owns up to it and that is **the first step in finding living water for a thirsty soul**. We must give an honest confession about our lives. Jesus replies: ‘What you say is true. You do not have a husband. You have five husbands. And the man that you are living with now is not your husband.’ Note that Jesus does not shake his finger in her face and give her a lecture on what an evil person he is. Rather, he brags on her for telling the truth. I wish that we could somehow get this message across in the church. The purpose of religion is not to dwell on the bad in people, but to enhance the good in people. It is to elevate people and not pull them down. We haven’t always done a very good job of that in the church I am afraid.” (Ibid.)

“‘It is interesting to note that in her enthusiasm to tell her story, she lost the shame of her sin. She came to the well in solitude; she returns in congregation. She came to the well as one disgraced; she returns as one graced!’” (Ibid.)

“And, if you are wondering, folks are ready to listen. In the words of Jesus, ‘Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.’ Statistics indicate that half of the adult population in America is unchurched (unchurched being defined as those who have not been to worship within six months except for a Christmas, Easter, wedding, or funeral) – ONE OUT OF TWO! They may have their name on the roll somewhere but they do not attend worship. Sadly, we have some like that on our own roll right here. They are effectively unchurched.

“But the good news is that three out of five of these unchurched friends say they would respond positively to an invitation to come. Your word of grace is especially important in times of stress: divorce, unemployment, birth, illness, death.

“One more thing – be persistent...not obnoxious, persistent. And be specific. A casual, ‘Why not come to church sometimes?’ will not do the job nearly so well as an invitation to a certain event or service. If your friends cannot come to his one, do not give up. Invite them again to something else.” (about 30% of Maple Grove’s own membership would meet this definition of unchurched) (David E. Leininger, “Unexpected Evangelists,” Collected Sermons (ChristianGlobe Networkds, Inc., 2005), 0-000-0000-16.)

“There was a wonderful man who was not well educated and his manner was somewhat rough and crude. He became a Christian and took the Lord’s requirement seriously. He kept pestering his pastor to put him to work. Finally, the minister handed him a list of ten names with this explanation: ‘These are all members of the church, but they seldom attend. Some of them are prominent people in the community. Contact them about being more faithful. Here is some church stationery to write letters. Get them back in church.’

“The man accepted the challenge with rugged determination and enthusiasm. About three weeks later a letter from a prominent physician whose name had been on the list arrived at the church office. Inside was a large check and a brief note: ‘Dear Pastor, Enclosed is my check for \$1,000 to help make up for my missing church so much, but be assured that I will be present this Lord’s Day and each Lord’s Day following. I will not by choice miss services again. Sincerely...P.S. Would you please tell your secretary that there is only one ‘T’ in dirty and no ‘C’ in Skunk.’” (Ibid.)