

In Spirit And In Truth

John 4:4-42
March 19, 2017

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

“God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

We read today a lengthy passage from John’s Gospel. We will be reading a few more lengthy passages in the next couple of weeks. We will be reading about encounters people had with Jesus. Today we read about an encounter a Samaritan woman had with Jesus. Next week we will be looking at an encounter a blind man had with Jesus. Two weeks from today we will look at an encounter a dead man had with Jesus.

Think about encounters you have had with Jesus. I hope there have been some.

In the third chapter of John’s Gospel there is the story of Nicodemus. He went to Jesus under the cover of darkness. Jesus told him about the new birth. This would be our first big encounter with Jesus...responding to his invitation to confess our sin and repent and receive him as Savior. We’ll come back to this.

Today we read about this woman. There are all kinds of issues going on here. She went to fetch some water. Nothing unusual in that. The chore of getting water usually fell upon the women. Thing is they usually went for water early in the day. Those water jars could get heavy when full. It was easier to accomplish the task of hauling water in the cooler part of the day. And the women travelled in groups. It was a social kind of thing. Get together and go for water and have some conversation.

The woman in our text who was about to have an encounter with Jesus went to the well alone. And she went at noon...the hottest part of the day. Alone and in the heat. Why was that? Well...we find out later in the story that there had been a few men in her life. She had

been married five times. Five marriages. Each one ended. That is pretty much an above average number of nuptials for one person. And she was with another man who was not her husband. Either she was working on marriage number six or she had given up on getting married.

I don’t want to read too much into this. But I will confess that I find it difficult not to assume a thing or two. Like...perhaps she was a topic of conversation among some of the other gals as they walked to and from the well. She just did not want to be a part of that. Can you blame her?

And I am not a psychiatrist or psychologist...not by any stretch of the imagination. I long ago gave up trying to figure out what makes some people tick. But what do you suppose was going on in this woman’s life...going on in her spirit? What would her attitude towards life have been...her attitude towards people...towards men? Was she foolish, naïve maybe? Or was she cold and calculating? Was she happy or bitter? See, I’m thinking she could not have been too happy. There was excess baggage and brokenness in her life. Her life had not had one meaningful and true relationship.

She met Jesus at the well. It was just Jesus and her. The disciples were off buying food. What follows is the longest recorded conversation Jesus had with one person. Jesus asked the woman for a drink. The woman was surprised by the request. Jesus was a Jew. She was a Samaritan. Jews were not overly fond of Samaritans. They usually did not talk to them. More than that, she was a woman. When the disciples later returned, they were surprised, not that Jesus was talking to a Samaritan, but that he was talking to a woman.

So the woman wondered how Jesus would dare to ask her for a drink. One other issue here...Jesus would have had to drink from a Samaritan's unclean cup.

The woman's reply was sarcastic. Let me paraphrase. She was saying, "Oh sure...we Samaritans are nothing but dirt under your feet...until you want something from us." So Jesus appealed to her curiosity by saying if she only knew who he was...well, she would ask him for a drink...and he would give her living water. She heard the words, but she missed the meaning. To her "living water" meant the fresh water the well could supply. She wondered how Jesus could get water out of the deep well. He had nothing with which to get the water.

The conversation progressed. Jesus talked about giving water that becomes in us a spring of water welling up to eternal life. We drink of the water he gives, and we will never be thirsty. The woman asked for that water. Jesus told her to go call her husband. She admitted she had no husband. That was a kind of half confession. She left out the part about the five former husbands and the non-husband she was with. Jesus pointed that out to her. She then perceived that Jesus was a prophet. Upon realizing that Jesus was some kind of a prophet, the woman steered the conversation to the topic of worship. Maybe the talk about husbands was making her uncomfortable. And perhaps she sought that one meaningful and true relationship with God...through worship.

I want to linger for a bit on this part of the conversation...the part about worship. There are many other parts of this encounter and conversation where we can spend some time. But I like this part. With all that was or was not going on in this woman's life, worship was still important to her. She had a question. Her question was not about the right way to worship...or the right attire for worship. She wanted to know about the right place...the proper location.

Now we generally know and believe that we can worship in most any place. We worship in designated sacred spaces and places like

this sanctuary. I have had great times of worship in places such as the BWCAW...profound and inspiring moments. I have been told by some during deer season that they will not be in church...but they will be worshiping God in their deer stand. That's a good place. Or the fishing opener...folks will be worshiping God, they say, in their boat...which I have always wanted to know how they do that. I mean, you know fishing is one of my passions. When I am in my boat, I have a difficult time worshiping...because I am concentrating on how to get a fish to bite on whatever I have tied to the end of my line. But that is a topic for another time.

The woman wanted to know about place. Jews said the place for worship was Jerusalem. Her people said "this mountain" was the proper place. The mountain to which she was referring was Mount Gerizim...where Jacob's well was...where she and Jesus were standing. Jesus answered her question about place. He talked about a coming time. And the place would not be in Jerusalem or on that mountain. The place was in spirit and in truth. Jesus said that God is spirit...and those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth. Literally, in spirit and truth. That's the place.

What did Jesus mean by that? What does this mean for us? See, most folks take this to mean that Jesus was saying worship is this kind of inner deal...like we worship God in spirit...from within...from our spirits...a spiritual deal. And we worship God with true worship as opposed to false worship. Okay...sure. But I think there is more to this. I think Jesus was saying something like it is pretty difficult to worship God if we are in the flesh. It is difficult to worship God if we have not first made a commitment of our lives to Jesus...and moved from a place of being in the flesh to being in the Spirit...moved from the place—as we talked about a few weeks ago—of walking according to the flesh to walking according to the Spirit.

It is like this. I have talked to so many people who want to understand the things of God before they make any kind of commitment. And I tell them they first must

make a commitment to Jesus before they understand the things of God. Confusing?

Let me explain. As you have heard, I made a commitment to follow Jesus in 1972. It was only after that when I began to understand spiritual stuff. Before that, it made no sense. But when I decided to follow Jesus, then the Spirit of God began to show me things. Many of you could offer this same testimony. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "People without the Spirit do not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for the things that come from the Spirit are foolishness to them, and they cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."

The same goes for worship. Paul also said, "I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus be cursed,' and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit." Before I decided to follow Jesus, worship was also totally without meaning for me. I said the words, but it meant nothing to me and did nothing for me. I mostly wanted to be somewhere else.

I mentioned Nicodemus earlier. Jesus told Nicodemus he had to be born from above. He had to be born of the Spirit into the kingdom of God.

Here is the deal folks...if we want to really and truly and meaningfully worship God, we can do so only if we have been born of the Spirit into the kingdom of God. If we are not following Jesus...if we are not living in the Spirit and walking with Jesus...then it does not matter where we worship. Place will mean nothing. A big church with all its fanciness...meaningless. A small church with its simplicity...nothing. Does not matter if we are in Jerusalem or on some holy mountain. We will only be saying the words and performing the motions. Where is the truth in that? True worship takes place not in any place in this world or in the flesh. It happens in the Spirit.

That was what Jesus told this woman...this woman who had all those relationships and who was hungering and thirsting for one meaningful relationship in her

life. Worship was not about Jerusalem or the mountain where she was. Worship would happen as she entered into a relationship with Jesus—Jesus who could give her water that would quench her thirst and well up to eternal life. Be born of the Spirit. Then she would know true worship.

Want to experience true worship? Then know Jesus...walk with Jesus...be in the Spirit.

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