

## A Determined Savior

John 4:1-26

A grocer put up a sign that read “Eggplants, 25¢ each or three for a dollar.”

All day long, customers complained, “Can’t you add? I should get four for a dollar!”

Meekly the grocer would acquiesce and bag four eggplants. The tailor next door had been watching and finally asked the grocer, “Aren’t you going to fix the mistake on your sign?”

“What mistake?” the grocer asked. “Before I put up that sign no one ever bought more than one eggplant.”

Man clearly has a capacity for innovativeness, and God has invited him to use this creativity in the pursuit of a cause higher than that of peddling eggplants. For whatever reason, God redeems people and then recruits those same people to join Him in the work of redeeming the world.

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present every one perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which works so powerfully in me. – Colossians 1:28, 29

It is hard to imagine why God, Who alone *CAN* save, would choose to involve us, who cannot save anyone, so deeply in His saving work. In any event, He has declared our roles to be vital. Still, no matter how enthusiastic or creative we are with our ideas for promoting our local church efforts, there must be an underlying passion to see that which is lost found if we are to expect our efforts to harmonize with the life-changing dynamic of God’s Spirit. Jesus came to deliberately seek and to save the lost. His determination is evidenced in the opening verses of our text:

<sup>1</sup>The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, <sup>2</sup>although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. <sup>3</sup>When the Lord learned of this, he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

<sup>4</sup>Now he had to go through Samaria.

As we noted last week, John the Baptist had begun to steer his disciples toward Jesus. John preached a message of repentance and announced that the forgiveness of sins was coming, but he pointed to Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Apparently, John was successful in directing others to Jesus, Who was now gathering a following at a faster clip than John. Given the messianic rhetoric surrounding this new Jesus movement, not to mention the miracles and a number of provocative teachings, the Pharisees were now more interested in Jesus than in John. But, at this early stage in the game, pharisaic opposition would arouse Roman curiosity and disrupt Jesus’ plans. He chose to return to Galilee whence He had originally come.

Palestine was only 120 miles long. In the south was Judea where Jesus was. In the north was Galilee where He wanted to go. In between was Samaria. Jews hated Samaritans. The direct route to Galilee from Jerusalem was through Samaria but, historically, most Jews would not take the direct route. They crossed eastward over the Jordan River, moved north through Gentile country and crossed back over to the west side of the Jordan when they got as far north as Galilee. Most Jews would turn a three-day trip into a six-day trip ... just to avoid Samaria. It was unusual for a Jew, particularly a rabbi, to pass through Samaria. Nevertheless, John writes, “Now he had to go through Samaria.”

Jesus did not have to go through Samaria in the sense that there was no other possible route. He was driven by His mission. He could not squander three days because of a 400 year-old feud. He had come to seek and save the lost. There were no church growth strategists to guide Him, only a one-track determination on His part to find lost people. Methods come and go. It is the impassioned heart of Jesus for the lost that must be restored to His church. Let us learn from His determination.

## **I. A Determination that Bridges Barriers (5-9)**

### **A. The Social Breach Between Jews and Samaritans Ran Long and Deep verses 5, 6**

...<sup>5</sup>So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup>Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

Jews hated Samaritans in part because they occupied holy land. The history of the Samaritans begins with the division of Israel into two Kingdoms after Solomon's death. Ten tribes became the northern kingdom of Israel. Samaria was the capital city. Two tribes became the southern kingdom of Judah, with Jerusalem as capital. In 720 BC, the Assyrians invaded the northern kingdom and carried away most of the people. The pockets of Israelites that remained intermarried with the occupying Assyrians, becoming a mixed race. To the Jews of Jesus' day, land promised to Abraham's descendants was infested with half-breeds. Samaria had taken the name of the ancient capital.

Two centuries after the fall of Israel, Babylon carried the people of Judah into captivity. When released, they returned to rebuild their nation. This group had maintained their national identity and racial purity. Samaritans in the area offered to help rebuild the temple at Jerusalem but were told by the Jews, "You have no part with us in building a temple to our God." Ezra 4:3). So, the Samaritans did all they could to thwart the project. Later, Sanballat, a Samaritan, tried to frustrate Nehemiah's project of rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 4 & 6). Nehemiah ran off a son of the high priest, who had married Sanballat's daughter (Nehemiah 13:28). The historian Josephus credits this renegade priest, one Manasseh, for building a temple for the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim, which a Samaritan woman will reference in the exchange she is about to have with Jesus.

### **B. This Exchange Reflects the Social Frostiness that Endured verses 7-9**

<sup>7</sup>When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?"  
<sup>8</sup>(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

<sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

There were actually two *faux pas* at play here. Men did not talk to women in public. This was typical among Jews and Gentiles, but John, writing to Gentiles, only needed to explain the racial rift. The woman recognized Jesus to be a Jew, possibly by His attire or speech. He had nothing with which to draw water, so she was understandably surprised that He asked to drink from her utensils. **Gross!** Jews and Samaritans don't share dishes! The disciples were off buying food. That was okay. The rabbis taught that Samaritan land was pure. It was, after all, Promised Land. So, if a Jew could stand to do business with a Samaritan, he could purchase the ground's produce and drink from Samaria's wells, but to eat or drink after a Samaritan, with the same ladle or cup was over the line.

Racism still abounds. Sexism still rears its head. How can this be? We have laws! Our legislature demands that we play nice with others. So, why do the tensions sometimes seem as high as ever? Is it because while legal fixes to problems of the heart can draw some lines for behavior and afford some people a degree of protection, they can never make the human heart nice?

Jesus can bridge historically explosive hostilities, not to mention, our more immediate and private hostilities, whenever contending parties choose to live in submission to Him. Jesus taught us all we need to know about human relationships when He said, "Love your neighbor as yourselves." By the way, when He defined "neighbor", He featured one of these despicable Samaritans, a man who cared for a Jewish crime victim while the most respectable men of his own race looked away.

This Samaritan woman was understandably cautious of this Stranger, but Jesus came to address her need. He shows us that it is possible to muddle beyond the sensitivities of racial and sexual injustice. But, the tools of the kingdom that can truly bridge these chasms are not produced by a legislature but by submission to the humble, compassionate and gentle lead that Jesus sets for us.

## **II. A Determination that Heals Hostilities (10-14)**

<sup>10</sup>Jesus answered her, "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."

<sup>11</sup>"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? <sup>12</sup>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?"

<sup>13</sup>Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup>but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

### **A. This Woman Was Not on the Same Page with Jesus**

Because he had grown up in New York City a young pastor barely knew a cow from an ear of corn, that is, until he married a country girl and took a country church. On the day of his first sermon he tried very hard to fit in – maybe too hard! He began his discourse: "I never saw a cow until I met my wife." Such is the limitation of words alone to connect our minds and thoughts.

Missionaries in Nigeria in the 1800s ran into a few problems translating Christian hymns into the languages of Nigeria. They hadn't grasped the basic fact that in some languages of Nigeria, different tones or pitches give words completely different meanings. And so for many years the missionaries had the Igbo people of Nigeria singing favorite hymns like: "God's pig, which is never shared," and the always inspirational hymn that begins: "There is no egg on the bicycle."

This woman was not connecting with Jesus. In her mind, "living water" distinguished spring or stream water from cistern or well water. This is all she could have understood Jesus to mean at this point. "Our father, Jacob dug this well because this is the only water around. Do you know something that he didn't? Besides, you don't even have anything with which to draw well water. I sure don't see a shovel. If there are underground springs around here, how do you expect to reach them?" Jesus said, "I mean truly living water, water that springs from within you and flows into eternal life."

## **B. An Ordinary Rabbi Would Not Have Let that Crack about Jacob Slide**

The Samaritans understood very clearly that the Jews thought they were less than the dirt under their feet. Some have suggested that her reference to “our father Jacob” was a somewhat defensive reminder that her people were something too. Others hear a dig. “You Jews think you are the exclusive heirs of the patriarchs, but not only is Jacob our ancestor also, but we have his well. And by the way, we also have the place where the bones of his favorite son Joseph are buried.”

But, the fact remained, though the Samaritans were indeed descended from Jacob, they had more pagan blood pulsing through their veins than Israelite blood. For these Samaritans to claim Jacob as their patriarch would gall an ordinary Jewish rabbi. The Samaritans had abandoned God’s covenant. Many rabbis, like many of us, whenever they heard something off the wall, especially an affront to their patriotism, heritage or religion, would feel compelled to straighten out wrong-headed thinking.

There was nothing argumentative in Jesus’ demeanor. Connecting the dots of her theology was not of the utmost urgency to Him at this point. He longed to address the most important need in her life, indeed in any of our lives. Jesus was looking for an opportunity to tell this woman of God’s love for her. He wanted her to know that the most precious gift in the world was hers just for the asking. Rather than debate her, Jesus chose to take her where He found her and patiently bring her along.

## **III. A Determination that Deflects Diversions (15-24)**

### **A. Was this Woman Poking Fun at the Strange Rabbi? (verses 15-18)**

<sup>15</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

<sup>16</sup>He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

<sup>17</sup>“I have no husband,” she replied.

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. <sup>18</sup>The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

The woman’s response strikes me as a wisecrack. “Mister, your living water could save me a lot of trips to this well.” Often, ridicule is a defense mechanism. Jesus knew this. If we recognized this more often, we might stay on task better when trying to make a case for Jesus. When our faith is mocked, personally or collectively, we can get militant. We might organize boycotts or send out electronic petitions. Or, we might recognize the desperation of a hurting world that chooses not to look at its sin. Of course, they don’t have to when Christians provide them with angry, indignant and self-righteous caricatures of Christianity instead of the meek and gentle real deal.

This woman’s personal life was a mess. She sensed that the conversation was venturing too far into the realm of the significant, so she deemed it easier to make light of Jesus than to let Him get too close to her. But, abruptly, He raised an issue that evidenced her hurt. “Go, call your husband and come back.” She answers evasively, “I have no husband.” Jesus knew this. “You’ve had five husbands. The man you are living with now has not covenanted himself to care for or protect you.”

Most people would rather ridicule our faith or speak of hypocrites they have known than face their own need and guilt. Criticism is always less painful than self-analysis. Without dismissing her or responding in kind, Jesus broached an issue that exposed the futility and the sin of her life. He knew of her past and present scandals and failures. He was determined to give her a future. Like Jesus, we must master the art of asking, "Hypocrites and fanatics aside, are you at peace with God?"

### **B. She Really, *REALLY* Wanted to Change the Subject (verses 19–24)**

<sup>19</sup>"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup>Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

<sup>21</sup>Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup>You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup>Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. <sup>24</sup>God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

What did temple locale have to do with "Living Water"? Jesus wanted to talk about sin's death and eternal life. The woman must have thought her diversionary tactic was very clever. She flattered Jesus and raised a different spiritual issue. "You know, Mister, I've always wanted to know why Jews worship in Jerusalem and Samaritans worship on Mount Gerizim." Jesus answered her question, but only so as to retrieve the conversation. "For now, the Jews are right. Their worship is rooted in revelation. That of your people is not." But, He immediately brings her back to the issue of spiritual authenticity before God. "Actually, God is looking for worshippers who will not be bound to a place. They will worship in spirit and truth. Will you be one who sees and worships God as He truly is?"

Diversionary tactics are still popular when confronting sin gets uncomfortable. Today, the questions are usually about mysterious biblical topics. "Hey, I have a question about the flood." "I have a question about angels." "Can God create something so big that even He cannot move it?" Why does a loving God allow natural disasters and suffering?" ... Anything to avoid facing one's own need.

### **Conclusion (25, 26)**

<sup>25</sup>The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

<sup>26</sup>Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

The woman tried to terminate the discussion. Jesus made her nervous. He knew her sins. She could neither sidetrack Him nor dismiss Him. He saw through her. She thought, "If I just boldly assert that we cannot really know anything for sure until *Messiah* comes, He'll have to agree with that." I don't think she was ready for Jesus' response: "I who speak to you am he." "*Messiah*, at your service."

Jesus once asked Peter point blank, "Who do you say that I am?" It was a fair question. Someone here today might need to answer it one way or the other. Is Jesus the One sent from God to impart life and light, or is He not? The story goes on to tell us that the woman summoned the people of her town to "see a man who told me everything I ever did." Could this be the Christ? Many in that town concluded that He was. As His ambassadors, it *IS* possible to be loving, gentle, and yet, driven by holy tenacity. People must be confronted with truth. Eternity hangs in the balance.