

“A LIFE-CHANGING ENCOUNTER”

John 4:5-26

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At the end of the day, if I think back, how often I realize that much of what happened that day was not even on my radar screen or to do list or in the most remote corner of my imagination when the day began. When I was first ordained, a fellow pastor once told me that in the ministry, the first phone call can sometimes set the agenda for the day. I think that's true in all our lives. Every day, things both good and not-so-good happen which change our plans and priorities, sometimes dramatically and significantly. News about a job promotion, a medical diagnosis, a friend's need, a national tragedy — can cause us to shift gears, to alter our plans and go in different directions than we planned when we got up this morning.

Today's Gospel lesson is the story of one of those phone calls. It is the story of a life-changing encounter. Oh, it started out like any other day. The female lead in our story was on her way to do what she did every day — walk to the village well to get water for her needs and for the needs of her family. Little did she think that her life would be changed while she was following her daily routine.

The Bible tells us that Jesus and his disciples were on a journey from Galilee to Jerusalem where the events of Holy Week and Easter would soon take place. They stopped at a village in Samaria, an area where the Jewish people had intermarried with the people of the land and so were considered sort of half-breeds in the eyes of strict Jewish law. Sometimes in our modern sophistication we forget that the Bible portrays Jesus as very human, with the same wants and needs as every other human being. In this story, the Bible tells us that Jesus was tired and thirsty.

Along comes this woman whom we soon learn is more tired and more thirsty than Jesus. While Jesus is not hesitant to ask her for a drink of water, her response shows that she is surprised that this upstanding Jewish man would have the time of day for her, a Samaritan woman who has been married five times and is now living with a man who is not her husband. Talk about a desperate housewife! Jesus soon zeroes in on the fact that this woman needed more than a bucket of water to quench her thirst. She needs the living water that is available only through God's grace.

I do not want to be hard on the Samaritan woman this morning. You and I may not have been married five times, live on the wrong side of the tracks, be involved in questionable relationships, but we are as thirsty as this desperate housewife, and have just as many questions about life as she did.

We are a thirsty people. We thirst for a sense of belonging. We thirst for affirmation and validation and acceptance. We are thirsty for safety and security. We thirst for purpose in our lives, for direction for the journey. Probably most significantly of all, we thirst for love, both to give and to receive. We don't have to cultivate these thirsts; they seem hard-wired into us. There is nothing wrong with these thirsts; they are part of who we are. Being thirsty is part of what it means to be human.

What do you do when you are thirsty? Sometimes we try to quench our thirsts in ways that are not healthy for us or for others. Because we want to belong, we may turn to whoever will have us — even if they're more interested in using us or abusing us for their

own ends. Because we want affirmation and validation, we sometimes agree to jump through whatever hoops our parents or teachers or bosses or friends want us to jump through, and life becomes a perpetual performance. Because we want safety and security, we can retreat into ourselves, huddling in bunkers of our own making. Because we want purpose and direction, we can spend too much time and energy taking our cues from other people. What we really want is love, but we often settle for something else: for others respecting us without really knowing us, for “making love” without intimacy, for a large number of “friendships” without any that are genuine and of high quality. Almost anything in this world can become a substitute for love, but our thirst will remain unsatisfied, and we will remain unrefreshed.

“*Everyone who drinks of this water,*” Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, “*Will be thirsty again.*” In other words, ultimately everything we do to quench our thirst that does not involve coming to Jesus will not satisfy us. For all our thirsts are but a manifestation of our deepest thirst, which is for the living God. Nothing or no one else will satisfy our thirst. Not tap water. Not bottled water. Only the “living water” that comes from Almighty God.

Now all the while we go to and fro trying to quench our thirst, eventually we discover, lo and behold, that thirsty as we are for God, **God is even more thirsty for us!** This is the good news that transformed the woman at the well. This is the good news that changed her life. This is the good news that has changed hearts and lives from that day until this.

Yes, God is thirsty for us! In last week’s story, Nicodemus came to Jesus. But in today’s reading, Jesus comes to the woman at the well. Jesus takes the initiative. He is not put off by the fact that men usually do not talk to women in Near Eastern culture. He is not put off by the fact that she is not of the same ethnic background that he is. Jesus is not put off by this woman’s questionable marital situation. No, none of these things are enough to cause a barrier to God’s love and grace. No matter what our gender, our race, our culture, our economic class, the status of our relationships — Jesus comes to us with words that can transform our lives!

Now this business of transformation is no small deal. When my boys were young, they had some neat cars and trucks that were called “transformers.” These vehicles looked innocent enough, but they could be bent and turned and changed into giant and intimidating looking robots! We, too, can be transformed, for God has placed the potential within us to become far more than we are now, far more than we think possible. Like the woman at the well who never dreamed when she got up that morning to fetch water that she would meet someone who would change her life, so Jesus encounters us, and offers us that living water which can and will transform our lives as well.

If we believe that God can transform us, and open ourselves to his power and his love, how do we live a transformed life? To put it simply and directly, living a transformed life means living at God’s direction. In his devotional book, *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God*, Bishop Rueben Job says that living a transformed life is more than we can do on our own. “*In fact,*” he says, “*Living the transformed life does not mean trying harder. It means trusting more and staying close to the only One who can make us more than we are.*”(1) This morning I am asking you, not to try harder, but to trust God more.

How hard it is to trust! My wife and kids gave me a GPS for Father's Day last year. You just put in the address and it tells you where to go and how to get there. But you have to trust that this electronic device knows what it is talking about and that it will get you safely to your destination. There is a definite analogy to our walk with God. This Lenten season, we are called not to try harder to follow Jesus, but to trust God more.

Note:

1. Shawchuck, Norman & Job, Rueben P. *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God*. Nashville, Tenn., 2003. p. 141.

“THE FIRST EVANGELIST”

John 5:27-29

Following her life-changing encounter with Jesus, the woman at the well could hardly contain herself. *“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”* Her words echo the invitation of Jesus to the disciples earlier in John's Gospel and Philip's invitation to Nathaniel to *“come and see”* Jesus.

What about this man who *“told me everything I have ever done?”* Think about that! Would you want to hear someone tell you everything you have ever done? Everything? Would you be comfortable around someone who knew everything about you? There are some things about my past I don't want to remember. There are some things I hope my parents never found out! Some things I don't want my kids to know! Some things I don't want anybody to know! Jesus knows everything I have ever done, and he loves me anyway! In spite of our past, Jesus is still thirsty to have a relationship with you and with me. That's the good news that blew the Samaritan woman away! That's the good news that changed, that transformed her life.

Not only did Jesus know who she was, but the Samaritan woman came to know who Jesus was. Not only did she discover who he was intellectually, but she gave her life to him. In one afternoon, she went from a desperate housewife to a disciple of Jesus. More than that, she went from a woman with a questionable past to a woman with an unlimited future, filled with all the power and possibilities of God's love.

Nicky Gumbel in one of the Alpha Series videos says that when his first child was born, it was such good news that he had to tell somebody. He wanted to tell everybody. He says he got on the elevator in the hospital and told perfect strangers that he wife had just given birth, that he was a new dad! The woman at the well was so excited that she had to tell somebody, she had to tell everybody about Jesus and what he had done for her.

She was astonished that Jesus knew all about her, but she was well aware that the townspeople knew all about her. Commentators speculate that's probably why she came to get her water at noon instead of in the morning when the other women customarily came to the well. She wanted to avoid their whispering and their gossip.

Would anybody believe her story? Would anybody take her seriously? She was an unlikely candidate, to be sure. But the Bible tells us that “*Many Samaritans believed the woman’s testimony.*” When a person comes to faith and his or her life is transformed, sometimes we are skeptical, and we say, “I wonder how long this will last?” But if the experience is genuine, the witness soon gains credibility and people become convinced. And so the first evangelist to the Gentiles is not one of the twelve disciples, who were still scratching their heads and asking theological questions, but this Samaritan woman who met Jesus unexpectedly and allowed her life to be turned upside down by him.

Have you been to the well lately? Are you still thirsty after all the different beverages you’ve tried? Take a drink of living water, and allow Jesus to transform your life. If you encounter him, or rather, I should say, if you let him encounter you, your life will be transformed. You will not be able to resist the urge to tell others about Jesus and invite them to experience what you have seen and heard!

My friends, God is thirsty for us! That’s the news this world is dying to hear. Isn’t it time we followed the Samaritan woman’s example? Isn’t it time we let God transform our lives? Isn’t it time we share this good news with everyone we meet?

Prayer: O God, just as you came to the Samaritan woman of old with the offer of living water, so come into our lives today and refresh and renew our spirits. Help us to drink deep from the well that never runs dry, and then help us to share the good news of your transforming love with everyone we meet. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.