

John 4:4-29

BENEATH THE SURFACE AND BEYOND

Thirty-five years ago I was riding in a car with one of my seminary professors, Dr. Dick Junkin, who taught church history. We were representing Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary and preaching in two Presbyterian churches in west Texas - quite a distance from Austin. Along the way, we had plenty of time to talk about our backgrounds, our families, our interests, and so on. At one point in the conversation, Dick asked me how I was doing and I responded by saying, Fine. Several miles of silence followed. Then, Dick asked me another question, How are you really doing?

This time around I answered him honestly. I opened up and told Dick that I wasn't doing as well as I tried to convey. I was struggling to keep up with the lengthy reading assignments and the numerous papers for each class. I was overwhelmed by the heightened expectations that were demanded by graduate work. And, I was missing my fiancée and my family, who were a long way off. Dick reassured me by saying that my concerns were fairly common to first-year students. And, he affirmed me by saying that he felt I was quite capable of meeting all that was required and expected of me.

I also appreciated how Dick Junkin challenged us to become more than we were. He wasn't willing to settle for less from us. He demanded our best and usually got it. All of my papers that I wrote for his classes received passing grades, and most of them were covered with red pencil comments out in the margins. It was Dick's way of continuing to teach his students asking a probing question, indicating how we could have improved our papers by elaborating on a point, referring us to another author with a different point of view, and commenting on the overall quality of our work. Dick always wanted us to excel in his classroom, the seminary overall, and in our future pastorates.

I share these remembrances with you in order to set the stage for our hearing the Word of God from the fourth chapter of John's Gospel wherein Jesus encountered a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. In both my introductory story and the biblical story there is a certain sense of going beneath the surface of simple, idle conversation and focusing on more important matters at hand. Also, there is the sense of a person moving beyond one level toward another stage of growth. Beneath the surface and beyond that's where my conversation with Dick Junkin led me; it's where Jesus' exchange with the woman at the well took her; and, beneath the surface and beyond is where our Lord desires to lead us on our spiritual journey through this life to the next.

The first thing to note about the scripture passage is this statement: He (Jesus) had to go through Samaria. Jesus and the disciples could have skirted the dreaded area of Samaria by staying on the east side of the Jordan River and following the valley north into Galilee. However, perhaps John was thinking about the spiritual necessity laid on Jesus to carry out the Father's will. Thus, his meeting with the woman at the well was not due to coincidence but the providence of God.

It was around noontime. Jesus was hot and tired from his journey, and he rested by Jacob's well while his disciples went to the city to buy food. A Samaritan woman came to draw water and Jesus asked her for a drink. It's hard for us to grasp how taken back she must have been by Jesus' request for men (especially rabbis) did not speak in public with women not even their wives. Besides, the woman was a Samaritan, and the Jews were hostile to the Samaritans because they

had intermarried with foreigners, who, in turn, made them half-breeds and full pagans as far as the Jews were concerned. Also, as we discover from the text, the Jews and the Samaritans did not agree on the proper place for worship. Then, it would appear that the woman had a poor reputation after all, why didn't she come to the well in the cool of the early morning with the other women to socialize while they gathered the necessary water for their daily needs? Since she showed up alone, at high noon, in the extreme heat of the day, we can surmise that she wanted to avoid the other women for certain reasons, which are included later in the text. It was strange indeed that Jesus spoke to her.

The woman showed her surprise at Jesus' request for a drink of water: How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria? Jesus responded by telling her, If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking me for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water. It's clear that the woman misunderstood what Jesus was saying. She thought he knew of some other source of water that was running or flowing water. And, when Jesus told her that the drink of water he would give would never lead to thirst again and would gush up to eternal life, she asked Jesus for a drink of this special water to end both her thirst and her countless trips out to Jacob's water well.

It's at this point in the story that Jesus drew the woman beneath the surface realities of her own life in order to help her uncover a deeper thirst for what was true. If Jesus were going to engage the woman as a child of God, then he needed to help her see her brokenness, her weakness, her corruption, her need, and most of all her deep thirst for a sense of purpose and worth. So Jesus asked about her husband; and when she answered, I have no husband, Jesus confronted her with her inability to love herself or to love others. After all, she has had five husbands, and has a live-in lover at present. She was looking for love in all the wrong places; unless and until she partook of the Living Water she would remain shriveled, dry, and barren. Until she opened herself up to God, she would never experience the abundant life.

The conversation became uncomfortable for the woman because Jesus had gone to meddling. So, she did what every one of us has done at some point in our lives; when the going gets tough, we change the subject! She flattered Jesus about being a prophet and then she steered the conversation to the topic of the best place to worship God on Mt. Gerizim, which was favored by the Samaritans, or Jerusalem for the Jews. Jesus responded by speaking of true worship that transcended geographical and cultural boundaries. After all, God is spirit so God is present everywhere. The place wasn't crucial as long as people worshipped God in spirit and in truth.

As their exchange went deeper and deeper beneath all of the surface pleasantries, Jesus led her to a point in the conversation where he was ready to reveal, and she was able to hear, that he was the Messiah. She said to him, I know that the Messiah is coming (who is called Christ). Jesus said to her, I am he, the one who is speaking to you. The truth was out. Later on in John's Gospel, Jesus would use other I am statements about himself to help his disciples understand his true nature: I am: the bread of life; the light of the world; the door of the sheep; the good shepherd; the resurrection and the life; the way, the truth, and the life; and, the vine. And, of course all of these I am statements connect Jesus with the God who revealed himself to Moses there at the burning bush, saying, I am who I am. In other words, Jesus was/is God himself - in the flesh! But, for the very first time, Jesus gave full disclosure of his divine nature to the woman at the well.

In doing so, he affirmed her. He saw her for what she was, and loved her in spite of her condition. Jesus gave her the water of life welling up inside her eternally. He gave her himself and he gave her herself, as well. Jesus gave her the freedom to be all that she was originally created to be. He released her from her shame, by facing it and transforming it. (Pamela R. King, Lectionary Homiletics, Mar. 1996, p. 15)

Now then, here's the good news of the Gospel. Jesus will do the same for us as well. As we ask for the spring of water gushing up to eternal life, we will receive. As we worship and spend time with Jesus, most of all, he will give us what we need the most the gift of himself. He will lead us deep below the surface of mere existence and reveal to us the abundant and eternal life, which leads to a life of purpose, joy, and fulfillment. In the process, we will not stay the same. Christ will help us to move beyond by helping us to grow, to change, to be transformed into more committed disciples.

I don't know if you picked up on it in the story but the Samaritan woman grew in her understanding of and her relationship to Jesus. At first, she addressed him as Sir. Then she said to him, Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Finally, she asked the rhetorical question, He cannot be the Messiah, can he? I should also note that she went and told the people of the city about Jesus. They came out to meet Jesus and asked him to stay with them. And many believed because of his Word. In fact, they told the woman point blank: It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world. Do you get the sense of movement, of growing beyond and becoming more by their encounters with Jesus? They simply couldn't remain the same; they were changed for good.

And, did you notice that John never tells us the name of this woman? Perhaps by leaving her nameless, John is inviting his readers to identify with her, and come alone to the well to be encountered by Jesus. If Jesus did that for a Samaritan woman, then he can also know you and me deep down, love us anyway, forgive us totally, and help us to grow by degrees as his disciples. God's grace and mercy can happen to us also. We too can leave the past behind and become new creations! We too can drink from the fountain of living water that wells up to eternal life.

I have always cherished the story from long ago about two brothers, who were convicted of stealing sheep. In accordance with the law of the land, they were branded on the forehead with the letters S and T, which stood for sheep thief. One of the brothers, unable to bear the stigma, tried to lose himself in a foreign land. But people would ask him about those two letters on his brow and what they meant. He wandered from land to land, and at length, full of bitterness, he died and was buried in an unmarked grave. The other brother, who had repented of his terrible deeds, did not run away but faced up to the truth. He thought, I can't run from the fact that I stole sheep; here I will remain until, with God's help, I can win back the respect of my neighbors. Over the years, he established a reputation for respectability, integrity, and a Christ-filled life. One day a stranger came into town and he saw an old man with the ST branded on his forehead and so he asked a native of the town what the letters signified. The man scratched his head, and after giving it some thought, said, It all happened so long ago, and I've forgotten the particulars, but I believe those letters, S and T, are the abbreviations for the word, SAINT.

As we come into the presence of the living Lord, he will draw us below the surface and then move us beyond where we were as he leads us to new possibilities and new life. Let us drink deeply of his living water, and let us move beyond

ourselves to tell others what Christ Jesus means to us and what a difference he has made in our lives. And, let us continue to grow in our ability to give praise to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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