

“Desperate Housewife”

John 4:1-26

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
June 5, 2005

She was at a low point in her life, disappointed, confused, lonely and scared. The last thing she expected that day was for someone to be nice to her, much less help her. You can imagine her surprise when she neared Jacob’s well and a man that was resting nearby asked for a drink.

In disbelief she asked why he would speak to her because he was a Jew and she was a Samaritan. This began a dialogue between the two of them that resulted in her running back to town without the water she came for so she could tell everyone about the kindest and most remarkable man she ever met.

This story is commonly titled, “The Woman at the Well.” Since she was given no name, it is the best we can do. Even this says something about her lowly status in life.

However, I suspect everyone in the little town of Sychar knew her and her name came up quite often, especially when gossip fodder was needed. After all, she had been married five times and was living with a man to whom she was not married. She was an easy target, wasn’t she?

Until recently, I always thought the heaviest load she was carrying was a huge amount of guilt. I’ve changed my mind and John Claypool helped me do so. She was not reeling from guilt, he believes, but grief.

She was divorced five times. Women could not initiate divorce proceedings in that culture. Only men could divorce women. Five times she had been rejected and discarded for someone else. Five times she had been told that she was unimportant and unnecessary. Five times she had been set out on the curb with no place to go or way to take care of herself. Evidently the sixth time she wasn’t expecting much more. She really was a desperate housewife.

Can you imagine the pain she felt? Would there be any way to measure her disappointment, fear, anxiety or loneliness?

When was the last time someone spoke a kind or truthful word to her? Had anyone in her life kept a promise? Had she been affirmed for anything she did? Did she matter to anybody?

What do you think this woman needed most? I think she needed to be recognized as a person with feelings, hopes and dreams. She needed polite conversation with another adult. She needed someone to take her seriously, someone that would talk to her about serious topics and issues. She needed understanding to sort through her confusion, compassion to heal her wounds and encouragement to persevere in a hostile environment. She needed someone that would trust her to be the bearer of good news that others needed to hear.

What did Jesus do? All of these things and many more!

Now, I want you to notice something about this story that is central to it. You must not miss it. The encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well occurred on an ordinary day in an ordinary place while she was doing an ordinary task. William Willimon finds this significant and so do I.

This woman’s life-changing event occurred while she was going about her daily duties. She was caught up in the routine and mundane when Jesus walked into her life and changed her forever.

Surely you see the importance of this. I know God can reach out to us when we have made it convenient for Him to do so, at church, on a retreat or during personal devotions. However, He may choose to do so while we are busy about life’s chores and responsibilities and catch us completely by surprise. After all, he told Nicodemus, who by the way made it very convenient for Jesus to touch him by initiating a visit to Jesus at night when neither was busy,

that “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it is coming from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” John 3:8.

Jesus told Nicodemus that nothing was as unpredictable as the movement of the Holy. For sure, man could not manipulate or control Him. I’m not sure Nicodemus ever understood. I’m fairly certain we don’t.

Let me encourage you to do something in Sunday School next Sunday. Briefly share with your class your most intimate encounter with God. You don’t have to go into great detail, but tell others when and where it occurred. Chances are, for many of us, it was not at church and it caught us completely by surprise. See how many in your class had an experience similar to this woman at Jacob’s well.

Secondly, let me encourage you to surprise some people this week by being the living presence of Jesus in their lives. Who are the women and men at the well in our society? Who are the people that have been hurt and disenfranchised by the religious establishment? Who is the object of gossip among us? I suspect some are in your family or neighborhood. As a matter of fact, I know they are.

According to an article, “What Is the Future of Ministry in the U.S.” by Earl Creps, only seventeen percent of Americans attend church regularly. The number of adults not attending church has almost doubled since 1991. When asked why they are not attending any longer, many responded by saying, “They view congregational life as highly charged with bigotry and hypocrisy.”

Find these people and do for them what Jesus did for this woman at the well. Engage them in polite conversation about things that are important to them. Be compassionate and respectful. Compliment them. Encourage them. Share some good news with them. Celebrate with them when they share good news with you.

By the way, do this not only for family members and friends but also for those that are very different from you, in gender, race, nationality and religion. That is, if you really want to do what Jesus did that day at Jacob’s well.

Parker Palmer cautions us to be careful how we define hospitality in contemporary communities of faith. He writes, “When Christian communities picture themselves as families to attempt to embody what they believe to be hospitality, that image actually undermines the public life in the church in such a way that strangers feel excluded rather than included. Christian communities are called instead to practice the living presence of God, who in Christ bridged gaps, healed wounds and surmounted obstacles in such a way that all, especially the stranger, the outcast and the marginalized were accepted into the community.”

I must tell you that taking Palmer seriously and practicing what Jesus did will raise some eyebrows. Look at the reaction of Jesus’ disciples as they returned with the food that Jesus requested.

“Just then, his disciples returned and were surprised to find Jesus talking with a woman. But no one asked, ‘What do you want? Why are you talking with her?’ ”John 4:27.

I can see the disciples now. They must have given each other the strangest looks as they approached Jesus and this Samaritan woman. Why would Jesus be talking to a woman and this one in particular? Even Simon Peter, the disciple who never kept a question or opinion to himself, did not open his mouth. That tells me that something very significant was happening, something holy, and it did not need to be interrupted or explained at that moment. It needed to be observed and pondered.

There is no way you can read this story without re-examining how you see God, people and the Christian faith. God is full of surprises, people are full of needs and our faith should prepare us to be ready for both when they enter our lives. So get ready for God to visit you when you least expect it or put you in the path of some desperate housewife that needs your help. I assure you both will happen when you least expect them.