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MARCH 15, 2020

JOHN 4:5-42
“A Surprising Conversation”

The main point of the sermon is that Jesus offers an outcast woman the gift of eternal life, who goes on to testify about Jesus to her outcast people, who come to believe that Jesus is the Savior of the world. We see the work of the Father being fulfilled in Jesus and done in and through the Spirit.

A Surprising Encounter

Tasha and I have recently been watching *The Crown*. In an early episode, shortly after Elizabeth becomes Queen, she enlists the help of a tutor, because she feels intimidated trying to converse with the educated men who made up her government. She felt like she couldn't hold a conversation when the topics drifted beyond dogs and horses. And in some way, that's true of us: We all like to stick with what we know with who we know.

That's what makes Jesus so unusual. He had the ability to engage and converse with all sorts of people. He was never lost for words. He knew how to reach people on the deepest level. He was never outmaneuvered or stymied. He was like a surgeon when it came to conversations. He saw the real nature of the problem, and he had the precision and skill to go right at the real issue.

And perhaps, that is nowhere better demonstrated than his conversation with the woman of Samaria. It might be the most surprising encounter in the Gospels, because it crossed *numerous* social and religious conventions, and yet for Jesus the conversation wasn't "beyond the pale." Because for Jesus, this woman's need was no different than anyone else's. No different than Nicodemus's. No different than mine. And no different than yours. That need, however, isn't always so clear. And when things aren't clear, when we've become too accustomed to the way things are, what do we need? We need someone from the outside to come and show us what we don't see. And that's what Jesus is doing. He's coming from the outside to clear things up. He's sorting out the confusion.

Confusion about Living Water

This is the first time in John's Gospel that we hear of Jesus being in need. Not too long ago he turned nearly 180 gallons of water into wine (cf. 2:6-9), but now, sitting by Jacob's well, he asks for a drink. He's without a bucket and without his disciples. And so, he asks this woman for a drink. And while she doesn't reject Jesus' request, she's too surprised and shocked to meet Jesus' need. She can't easily overlook the deep-seated tension between her people and Jesus' people.

We know Jews and Samaritans maintained an intense distrust and hatred. By the first century, there had already been around two centuries of bitter hostility between Jews and Samaritans.

Both sides had committed violent acts against the other. And on top of that, men and women, especially Jewish men and Samaritan woman, did not engage in extended conversations.

She's understandably surprised. Who could blame her? But listen to Jesus' response: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (v. 10). Jesus' point is that her surprise isn't as great as it should be. She thinks she understands the dynamics of the situation. But, she doesn't. She assumes she knows all there is to know about this man. But, she doesn't.

She looks at Jesus and sees a thirsty, tired, and bucket-less traveler. In her mind, what could this man possibly offer her? And we too ask, what is it that Jesus can give? What he does offer that we can't attain on our own? Those are good questions. Necessary questions to understand Jesus.

And Jesus makes his case. He points out we're always thirsty. We're always in need of water; we don't last long without it. But physical thirst isn't everything. In fact, as Jesus is using it here, our physical thirst is an illustration of an even greater need that can only be satisfied by the gift of living water that only he can give.

And the greater need is that we are without life. We have a physical life but there's something wrong. Something that goes beyond our physical needs. Our problem is that we've been separated from the eternal life of God because of sin. We're darkness instead of light. We believe in lies instead of the truth.

Remember in *Toy Story*, how Buzz Lightyear thought he was real space ranger? In a similar way, that's our delusion. Sin hardens us to believe that we can be real without God. We believe we can see without God. We come to trust that we can know what is true and right without God.

But Jesus knows our problem better than us. And not only does he know our true problem, but he's able to do something about it. His message to the woman is that he can do more than point her to another water source. He can do something greater by planting a life-giving water source in us. What Jesus is offering is to plant the life of God Himself in us (cf. Eph. 2:19). The living water is God, because God is the fountain of life (cf. Jer. 2:12; 17:13).

Confusion about Worship

And now, the woman's response in verse 15 suggests that she thinks Jesus has something to offer even though we know she doesn't understand what he's offering. And so, why does Jesus tell her to call her husband? It seems out-of-place, especially since we learn that Jesus knew she didn't have a husband.

I think the reason is this: She asked Jesus for the water, as she put it, "so that *I* may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." By telling her to call her husband, Jesus is taking the opportunity to teach her that his gift is to be shared. The living water, the gift of God's life, is not to be hoarded or kept secret. It is *for* the world.

And the irony is that the woman, by the end of passage, becomes instrumental in bringing part of the world to Jesus. But before that, she steers the conversation away from her past marriages and current living situation to a debate that fueled the division between Jews and Samaritans—the true place of worship.

Because Jews and Samaritans disagreed about the place of worship, each group would have viewed the other's worship as illegitimate or invalid. Now, I know it can be hard to understand how there could ever be disagreements about worship, but this issue was more than a matter of taste and preference. The right place of worship would determine who is truly the people of God.

And it's clear from Jesus' answer that worship doesn't concern the *where* but the *who*. It isn't this or that mountain that determines worship. What matters is that we worship the Father in spirit and truth. In fact, Jesus says, "those who worship him [the Father] must worship in spirit and truth" (v. 24).

Now, how do *we* do that? The paradox is that true worship ultimately depends on God. We can't manipulate worship. We can't fake it. Yes, worship is *our* response, but a response to what? It is a response to how God has made Himself known. And in his prologue, John put it like this, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (1:18). That's why true worship depends on God. We depend on God to make Himself known. Without His self-disclosure, we worship blindly. So, you see, true worship is possible *through* Jesus. You could say it like this, the Father seeks worshipers who respond in faith to His Son all by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And the irony is that the woman has never been closer to the place where God is worshipped. She's seeing God's ultimate revelation of Himself (cf. Heb. 1:1-2).

I think Jesus' answer here surprised the woman. It must have been different from anything she'd heard. That explains what she says about the Messiah in verse 25. It seems that Jesus' impressive statement about worship got her thinking about the Messiah would come to proclaim all things. But again, the irony is that she's explaining the Messiah to the Messiah.

And notice, Jesus doesn't correct her. He doesn't adjust what she thinks about the Messiah. Instead, he reveals himself to be the Messiah. And he uses the language of God in the Old Testament. He draws upon God's self-revelation to Moses at the burning bush when he says, "I am he."

And what's interesting is that there's no response. No counter questions. I think the point is that the woman's confusion has been answered. Maybe it's not completely answered, but she's heard the most important message: Jesus is the Messiah who speaks the very words of God.

Confusion about Food

And when the disciples return, they're silent. They're too shocked to ask her or Jesus anything. And what's interesting is the woman isn't silent. When she returns to her city, she does something that's highly unusual. She goes to the men of the city (our translation says "people")

but the Greek is masculine) and shares her testimony about a man who knew her in a way beyond comprehension. And remember what we're told about her personal history. It isn't hard to fathom that her city would have questioned her character. What she's doing defies custom. But amazingly, the men respond. They accept her invitation and head off to see for themselves.

And while that's going on, we're told the disciples were urging Jesus to eat something. They're concerned about his physical condition, but that's not Jesus' focus, is it? And when he says he has food to eat they don't know about, his point, as it was with the woman, is to teach them our needs go beyond food and water. Our need is for eternal life; it is to have fellowship with the life of God.

And as Jesus is saying that, what's happening? The men from Samaria are on their way to fountain of life. They're journeying towards the spring of living water. They're coming to Jesus, the one who can give the gift of God. That's why Jesus tells the disciples to lift up their eyes and see who's coming. Right in front of the disciples, while they've been focused on food, Jesus has been gathering fruit. He's been doing his Father's work. Exhausted, hungry, thirsty. It didn't matter. Jesus came so we could have life.

That's why ultimately, he had to give up his own. He was separated, so we could be reconciled. That's why on the cross, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." It wasn't just a physical thirst, but he was experiencing the utter depths of separation and exile from the life of God. He went through the darkest valley, the greatest loneliness, so we could have the greatest reunion with God.

Life-Changing Understanding

And notice, we're told that Jesus stayed two days with the Samaritans. I think the irony is this: it was Jesus who was hosting them. It was Jesus who was providing for their needs. They were the guests and who were welcomed into the life of God. And the shock is that Jesus is welcoming and hosting a group of people who would have historically been viewed as outcasts to the true people of God. And they're there because an outcast woman shared the amazing news of a man who truly understood her need.

It's so incredible, isn't it? This all began with Jesus asking for drink. And we're never told if Jesus ever got his drink. But what we do know is that group of unlikely people got more than just another bucket of water. They received grace upon grace (cf. John 1:16).

And so, if you're tired of constantly searching for the next bucket, the next thing, to satisfy your thirst, know that there is a man who gives something better, something that fills our greatest need.

And this is the testimony we can share. We aren't the living water, but we know his name. He's the gracious host. His table will never run empty. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow, Jesus is truly the Savior of the world. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.