

Wesley United Methodist Church

March 23, 2014

"God's Grace."

John 4:1-42

There was a cartoon I saw sometime back which showed a little boy kneeling by his bed saying his bedtime prayers. He prayed, "As you know God, Monday is the first day of school. I hope you won't lose sight of me in the crowd. Amen. Then he climbs into bed, thinks for a minute, and then crawls out again, and adds to his prayer: "Oh, and by the way God, I'll be the one wearing blue shorts and a Bronco's T-shirt."

Like this little boy, the woman in our Scripture for today, needed someone to see her. She had lost sight of her life and was sure that God had, too.

Jesus is in a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" Just a little history here, Jews do not associate with Samaritans much less with a woman. Later in the story it is suggested that this was also a woman of questionable morals.

And yet 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." As they talk, something real begins to happen in this woman's life. Meanwhile Jesus' disciples return from shopping for supplies in the nearby town. They are surprised to find him talking with a woman. If they had only known what kind of woman she was, they would have been more surprised. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "What are you talking with her?" But the ending to the story is what is fascinating. John tells us that, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" Then the people she talked to came out of the town and made their way to Jesus.

A few verses later we read, "Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony. 'He told me everything I ever did.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman, 'We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.'" Can there be a more beautiful statement of the grace of God than this one? A woman with a somewhat checkered past had become a cheerful supplier of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

However, I believe there are some additional things we need to say about this story. First of all, this is not a story of cheap grace. What is cheap grace? Let me give you an example.

A man had been working for a lumber yard for twenty-five years. During that time, whenever he wanted any lumber, he helped himself to it. In fact, he had stolen so much lumber that he became one of the richest men in town. He became so rich and prominent, in fact, that he was made a deacon in his local Baptist church.

This worried him because he felt he should not serve as a deacon with this terrible sin on his conscience. One night as he turned and tossed in his bed, the thought came to him that he could go to the local priest about it. The priest said it was a bit unusual for a Baptist to come to confession, but he would be glad to hear him.

After the man had told the priest about stealing all of the lumber, he said, “You know, this thing they say about confession being good for the soul is right. I never felt so relieved in my life...and that’s all there is to it?”

“Why, no,” said the priest. “You can’t lie and steal and lead a life of sin for twenty-five years and come down here and talk to me for thirty minutes and wipe the slate clean. You’ve got to do something to make it right with the Lord. Did you ever make amends?” “No, I never did make one of those,” said the man, “but if you’ve got the plans, I can get the lumber.”

That’s cheap grace, wanting to have your sins forgiven, but not wanting to give up the lumber you have stolen. It was Dietrich von Bonhoeffer who made the phrase “cheap grace” popular. Here is how he defined it: “Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the church. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, communion without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.”

I fear that cheap grace is the grace that has become somewhat the norm in many churches today. When Jesus encountered people their lives were radically changed. Zaccheus the tax collector shared a meal with the Master and he cried out, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

Mary Magdalene, possessed by demons, becomes such a devoted follower that she is privileged to be the primary witness to Christ’s resurrection.

The Apostle Paul constantly reminded his hearers of what they had been before Christ touched their lives. Referring to the sexually immoral, idolaters, thieves, drunkards, swindlers, etc. He also reminds his hearers of what he had been. Before Christ touched him he was an intolerant persecutor of Christians. In the military, we hear the command, “As you were.” We never hear, “As you were,” as a follower of Christ. Following Christ is about real change.

It is said that St. Augustine, shortly after his conversion, was accosted on the street by a former mistress. Augustine turned and walked in the opposite direction. Surprised, the woman called out, “Augustine, it is I.” but Augustine, proceeding on his way, called back to her, “Yes, but it is not I.” An amazing change had taken place in Augustine’s life. We’re not talking about adopting a few new resolutions. We’re talking about the conversion that accompanies a changed heart.

If you see a butterfly, would you say, “Hey, everybody, look at this good-looking converted worm!” Why not? After all it was a worm. And it was converted. No, now it is a new creature, and you don’t think of it in terms of what it was. Now you see it as a butterfly.

The woman at the well became a butterfly. From a woman shunned by her neighbors, she became a person who pointed others to the Lord.

Would you like to have that kind of change take place in your life? There is only one place it can be found. That is at the feet of our Savior. That is exactly where the woman at the well found grace the day she encountered Jesus. Someone has captured the longing in her soul in a song that most of you are familiar with:

“Fill my cup, Lord, I lift it up, Lord! Come and quench this thirsting of my soul;

Bread of heaven, Feed me till I want no more  
Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole!  
Is that the longing of your soul? Jesus said to this woman, “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.” Do you desire that living water? Lift your cup to Christ today.