

One day a jet airline left Washington, D.C., with the destination of Columbia, South Carolina. On board was a counselor traveling to Columbia for a mental health conference at the University of South Carolina. The counselor was an atheist.

Somewhere during the flight the pilot discovered the landing gear was stuck. That meant trouble. He turned the plane and headed for Greensboro, North Carolina. There was a facility there where mechanics on the ground could give instructions to the pilot by radio and make a visual observation as the plane flew overhead. The instructions which the mechanics gave this pilot were quite dramatic. Following their advice, the pilot put the plane through every acceptable procedure known to shake down the landing gear. He made several nose dives. He rocked the plane back and forth. He even put the plane through a stomach-churning free-fall. Meanwhile the passengers prepared for a crash landing. Finally, in a spray of sparks and flames, the pilot cradled the craft to a safe landing a few hundred yards from the maintenance hangar.

In an interview late that night, the counselor said that this was his first time flying. He said that during the tumbles, turns, and pitches of the plane, though he was an atheist, he prayed! *“This might make me change my ways,”* he concluded.

There are stories in the Bible of people who met Christ and then changed their ways. Such is the story of the woman at the well.

The 1st thing we need to note in today’s reading is: this story is set in Samaria. You’re familiar with the prejudices that Jews had against Samaritans. **THIS CONTEXT IS VITAL.**

The Samaritans were a group of Jews from the province of Samaria who had intermarried with foreigners. The Jews considered Samaritans as social outcasts, untouchables, racially inferior, practicing a false religion.

Both claimed to be true descendants of the nation of Israel. Samaritans descended from the northern kingdom of Israel while the Jews descended from the southern kingdom of Judah. The Jews’ believed Jerusalem was the only true place of worship, while the Samaritans located the true place of worship at Mt. Gerizim. In 128 B.C., the Jews destroyed the Samaritan temple at Mt. Gerizim.

Any close physical contact with a Samaritan, drinking water from a common bucket, eating a meal together, would make a Jew ceremonially unclean. This meant they were unable to participate in temple worship for a period of time. The hostility between the two groups was so great that Jewish travelers usually chose not to travel through the area where the Samaritans lived. They would not even talk to each other. The relationship between the Jews and Samaritans was very similar to the relationship between Jews and Palestinians today.

The Pharisee in his prayer would say, *“I thank God that I am not a woman, Gentile or Samaritan,”* and would pray that the Samaritans are not included in the resurrection.

This is the background of this story. Jesus and his disciples have been traveling for some distance and he is tired and thirsty. His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. **He sits down by a PLACE known as Jacob’s well.** A Samaritan woman comes to the well to draw water. Jesus says to her, “Will you give me a drink?”

Here we go again. There were not only strict rules about Jews and Samaritans talking with one another. There were also rules about men and women conversing.

The Samaritan woman is surprised, and somewhat rude. She says to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?”

Can’t we all get along? If there was some way to remove blind hatred from human relationships, we could solve most of the world’s problems. Jews and Arabs, militant Islamists and the people of the West. Even in our own land. Blacks and whites, Anglos and Latinos, straight and gay. The list goes on and on.

Sociologist and evangelical Christian Tony Campolo tells a powerful story about a friend who’s a pastor of a church in Brooklyn, New York. It is run down, beat up and filthy. This friend got a telephone call one day from the local funeral director who said that he had a funeral that nobody wanted to take. None of the ministers in the area wanted anything to do with this funeral. The man had died of AIDS. **This friend, of Tony’s, Jim, took the funeral.** Tony Campolo asked Jim, *“What was it like?”*

He said that when he got there, there were about 30 homosexual men. They never looked up at him. Their heads were down and they stared at the floor the whole time he spoke. After the funeral service was over they got into the waiting automobiles and

went out to the cemetery. He stood on one side of the grave with the undertaker and the homosexual men stood on the other side. They were frozen in place like statues. They seemed to be motionless. Not a nerve or sinew moved as he read Scripture and prayed. They lowered the body into the grave and Jim pronounced the benediction. He turned to leave and then he realized that none of them were moving. He turned back and asked, “Is there anything more I can do?”

One of the men said, “Yes. They always read the 23rd Psalm at these things and you didn’t do that. Would you read the 23rd Psalm?”

Jim said, “Certainly.” And he did.

Another man spoke up and he said, There is a passage in the 3rd chapter of John which says, *“the spirit of God goes where it leads and you cannot tell on whom the spirit of God falls.”* Could you read that passage? And he did.

And then one of the men said, “Would you read to me and to all of us that passage that talks about the love of God, *that nothing can separate us from the love of God?*”

And Jim said, “I turned to these homosexual men and I said quite simply this, ‘Neither height nor depth nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come, neither life nor death, nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’”

Jim said nothing was more thrilling than to say to these men, who had been so ostracized and hurt by the church, that God still loved them and that nothing could separate them from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We may not agree with one another, we may not approve of one another, but must we hate? In the providence of God it is probably not accidental that our story for today is set in Samaria. The greatest problem in our world today is not global warming or poverty. **The greatest problem is the animosity between differing groups of people.**

The 2nd important thing we need to see today, is that Jesus reached out to the Samaritan woman. When she somewhat curtly turns aside his request for water, *he turns a seemingly chance encounter into an evangelistic opportunity.*

Jesus says to 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.”* This is a significant statement. **Jesus is offering the gift of grace to this Samaritan woman.**

It is clear that Jesus targeted his ministry at Jews, and Jews alone. In Matthew 15:24, he says specifically, *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”* Yet here he was offering the gift of “living water” to a Samaritan woman. He explains to her that if you drink this living water, you will never be thirsty again. But then the situation gets even more remarkable.

She responds to his offer: *“Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”*

And Jesus says to her, *“Go, call your husband and come back.”* Uh-oh! Do we have a problem? *“I have no husband,”* she replies.

Jesus says to her, *“You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”*

“Sir,” the woman says, *“I can see that you are a prophet.”*

He was a prophet, all right, but he was different than any other prophet she would ever encounter. He was breaking all the cultural taboos. He was reaching out to a woman, a Samaritan woman, a Samaritan woman who had been married five times and who was now living with a man who was not her husband. **AND JESUS WAS OFFERING HER, “GRACE.”**

This is startling even to this day--not what it says about Jesus, BUT WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT US! How did we as a faith community miss the Gospel so completely? How did we become so judgmental toward others? How did we allow ourselves to shut out those of whom we disapproved, when time and time again Jesus did exactly the opposite? *What is wrong with us that we cannot love those for whom he died?*

Anne Lamott, in her book *Traveling Mercies*, describes a time when a fellow church member told about adopting her son through an organization called *ASK, Adopt Special Kids*. Part of the adoption process included filling out a questionnaire checking yes or no to one’s willingness to adopt babies that had been born addicted, terminally ill, with physical “defects,” or mental disabilities. She and her husband had checked down the list. **Lamott’s pastor said that God, too, is like an adoptive**

parent who says, *“Sure, I’ll take the kids who are addicted, or terminal. I pick all the retarded kids and of course the sadists. The selfish one, the liars . . . I choose them. I choose the disobedient ones and the terrified ones. The self-indulged ones and the trouble-makers. The damaged ones and the unlovable ones. In love, I choose them all. I will be a parent to them all. I will end their separation and bring them home to me.”*

That’s the Gospel, friends. That’s the Good News. God’s grace is available to all. *To the immoral and the amoral, to the Arab and the Jew, to the native and to the illegal immigrant, to gay and straight, to black and brown and yellow and white.*
And it is good news.

Rev. Randall D. Bell tells a powerful story about a pastor who stood in court beside a member of his congregation—an individual who had been “out with the boys,” and had too much to drink. As he was driving home on the rain-soaked streets and through the dense fog, he turned a corner and heard a sickening clash of metal and breaking glass. Two young people lay dead. They had been thrown from their motorcycle. He was charged with manslaughter and driving under the influence. He sat in court trembling after days of testimony. The judge was about to speak. It could mean years of prison, loss of job, and poverty for his family. The judge spoke: *The test for drunkenness had not been properly done; the motorcycle had no proper lights; the jury was ordered to render a not guilty verdict.* He was a free man. The court declared him “not guilty.” His family kissed him—they could go on with their life, all because he had been declared innocent.

Then Rev. Bell adds these words, *“Now maybe this story and the way it ended angers you, because you hurt over those young people who were killed. But know this—you and I are that man. His story is our story. We are the sinner who finds himself in the presence of God the Eternal Judge”*

You see, not only are we blinded by our prejudices toward people like the Samaritan woman with her unseemly lifestyle, we are also blinded to the fact that we are the Samaritan woman. **We, too, have fallen short of the grace of God, but the hand of grace is reached out to us as well.**

THIS IS A STORY OF A “CHANGED LIFE.” *You may remember how the story ends.* His disciples return and are surprised to find Jesus talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”

Then, leaving her water jar, the woman goes back to the town and says to the people, *“Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?”* And the Gospel of John tells us that the people came out of the town and made their way toward Jesus.

John concludes this story of the Samaritan woman like this: 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.”*

Wow. What a witness. A Samaritan woman with a questionable lifestyle becomes a recipient of God’s grace and now she is a vehicle of grace to guide others to the Master.

Bruce Larsen, in his book Ask Me to Dance, includes the story of a member of his congregation who had come from another country. Pastor Larsen said of this person, “Her faith sparkled and the living water of the spirit flowed out of her soul to all around her.” He invited her to go with him to a seminar on the topic of evangelism. The leaders had prepared tables filled with all sorts of pamphlets and strategies and demographic studies, all aimed at reaching the un-churched in their area. At some point during the program the leaders turned to this woman and asked her to share some of the reasons that made the church so important and so vital in her home country. At first she was a bit intimidated by the crowds, but then she had this to say, “Well, we never gave pamphlets to people because we never had any. We just showed people by our life and example what it is like to be a Christian, and when they can see for themselves, then they want to be a Christian, too.”

That’s the bottom line, isn’t it? “We just showed people by our life and example what it is like to be a Christian, and when they can see for themselves, then they want to be a Christian, too.” **After her encounter with the Master, the Samaritan woman passed the test for being an effective Christian witness.**

The question is, considering Christ’s great love for all people AND YES, FOR THE SAMARITAN WOMAN—A STRANGER, can we DO THE SAME?

Amen.