

Lunchtime Watering Hole - Sermon Based on John 4:5-42

by David Hindman on Sunday, March 27, 2011

Folksingers Peter, Paul and Mary at the Mosque, now Landmark Theatre in the 1960s - my first live concert, a double date with a friend. My date was a disaster, Peter, Paul and Mary started the concert late as usual, and the tickets were \$5.00 each.

In addition to “Puff the Magic Dragon” and “If I Had a Hammer” they probably sang “Jesus Met the Woman at the Well,” their musical version of the story just heard. And surely Mary Travers’ sultry voice suggested that she was fallen with a tawdry past.

It’s true she’s had five husbands plus a live-in boyfriend. It’s true she’s come to Jacob’s well at noon when most village women would’ve come in the morning to visit and chat. Perhaps she is an outcast; an unwelcome outsider looked down on by her neighbors

But when Jesus talks with her, he doesn’t call her a sinner or criticize her for having so many men in her life, or tell her to get her act together and re-gain her virtue. He simply praises her for telling the truth. She herself doesn’t seem to be embarrassed that he knows this but sees it as be proof that he’s a prophet, a man of God with extraordinary powers of perception.

Perhaps she’s not as fallen as we think. In Jesus’ time, a young woman was usually married by the time she was 12 or 13, usually to an

older man. So perhaps she's simply outlived several older men through no fault of her own. Remember, Jesus' dad is not on the scene in Jesus' adult years. Like most men of the time, Joseph married a very young Mary and probably is dead as Jesus begins his ministry.

Here's another possibility. In Old Testament law, a man's relatives could marry his widow if he died childless. We read about such things in the books of Genesis and Ruth. One of the controversies between Jesus and religious leaders revolved around this question. A woman's been married to seven brothers who've all died. Finally she dies and Jesus' foes want to know whose wife she'll be in heaven. So perhaps this Samaritan woman and her husbands have simply been doing the right thing and obeying the Law. Five husbands are not her fault.

Or maybe she's been divorced through no fault of her own. In Jesus' day, women couldn't divorce their husbands, but husbands could do so quickly and easily for something as simple as a poorly cooked meal. I divorce you, I divorce you. I divorce you. Done.

True, the woman *is* living with a man outside of marriage. But desperate people do desperate things. In Jesus' culture, women were always at risk, vulnerable, without rights or privileges, without benefit of Social Services or Social Security or the safety nets we take for granted. Maybe

this is the best she can do. Maybe this is not a situation of sexual impropriety but social injustice when life is unfair and someone is stuck with no good help.

We probably assume the woman's a young, attractive temptress on the prowl for male prey. But she could be 80 years old. Maybe it's taken until Noon to get to the well because she's old and slow. Perhaps this woman's gotten an undeserved bad rap. We just don't know.

I want to put in a good word for her at this lunchtime watering hole. Last week, in chapter 3 of John's Gospel we met Nicodemus: respected Jewish leader. Learned teacher. He comes to Jesus at night and never quite understands Jesus' teaching about being born anew from above. And here is this despised Samaritan: an archenemy of Judaism. An infidel as far as Jews are concerned. An unnamed, uneducated woman, probably unable to read. She interacts with Jesus in broad daylight, not under the cover of darkness. Slowly but surely her understanding of Jesus' teaching unfolds. In her first encounter with Jesus she comes to know things Nicodemus doesn't, in spite of his credentials. Nicodemus plays his cards close to his chest and never asks a question of substance. This woman is openly honest – even if she's not proud of everything in her life. Eventually she engages Jesus in one of the most profound faith questions of her time about how to

worship God aright. And Jesus takes her seriously. She learns it's not *where* you worship but *how* that matters, and that true worship reflects the nature and character of God. She learns that whoever you are, if you truly love God and love others with the heart of God, you are worshiping in spirit and in truth. If you have to choose between being like Nicodemus or this woman, go for her. She's pretty impressive in Jesus' eyes.

I'm struck by the growth in her understanding of Jesus and her relationship with him. At first she thinks he's a weird, pathetic moron. She is stunned a Jew asks her for water – after all, Jewish men ignored and shunned women in public – even their wives! Jesus says something about giving her water and she thinks he's a dolt. He doesn't even have a bucket to reach into this 100' deep well. But as they talk she begins to understand first that he's a prophet, and then the Messiah, and through him her hoped for future is happening *now*. Ironically she should be asking *him* for water, the water of life. In fact, he *is* greater than her ancestor Jacob. Maybe it's because she's an outsider who doesn't count for much in the eyes of others. Compared to Nicodemus with his book learning and pre-conceived ideas of what's possible in the world, she's able to see much more clearly. She's more open to Jesus than Jesus' fellow believer.

In the end she still doesn't have all the answers. But that doesn't keep her from telling others what she does know and inviting them to experience Jesus for themselves. She's the first foreign missionary, the first person in John's Gospel to see Jesus for who he truly is. In John's gospel Jesus reveals his true identity to others through the so-called "I am" sayings – I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life. At this lunchtime watering hole for the first time Jesus says, I am your hope. I am the Messiah. And he's telling a woman, an outsider, someone on the other side of a wall, a non-believer. Jesus most readily comes to people like her - the vulnerable, those without all the answers but thirsty for something more, who honestly admit they're broken and don't have it all together. And the Nicodemus' of the church and the world don't easily get Jesus – those who think we've got it all figured out; fine upstanding community members, religious wizards but realistic about life in the real world, without a chink in our armor but bleeding to death on the inside.

Brothers and sisters, that living water is for any who are tired and parched by life – even us. We don't have to have all the answers to share our faith and our experience of God. Like the woman at the well, we can still have questions and struggles and even strong doubts. But we can tell

others what we do know and invite them to come and see for themselves.

And together as we remain with Jesus and learn his ways through prayer and scripture study and worship and silence and meeting him in the poor, we will come to know this for ourselves - he truly is the Savior of the world – the whole world of Jew and Samaritan, male and female, learned and unlettered, saint and sinner. We are simply to be like Jesus. Meet people where they are, especially those on the edge, the questionable or rejected or nobodies. We are simply to treat them with dignity and respect as treasured children of God no matter what. Tell them what we know, and invite them to come with us to see for themselves if Jesus is true and for real.

Someone once said that evangelism is simply one hungry beggar telling another where they can find bread. Jesus met the woman at the well and meets us at the deep well of our need. Go and tell those thirsty for God or mercy or joy or simply more to life than what they know so far where they can get a drink. Bring them to Jesus and let him take it from there.

Amen.