

## JESUS AND THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson

Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA

March 3, 2002

---

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

---

Last Tuesday, lovers of country music celebrated the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday of Johnny Cash. For nearly 50 years Johnny Cash has entertained presidents and prisoners. His face sometimes has the appearance of an Old Testament prophet and at other times the forlorn look of a skid row bum. Cash has lived a hard life. He grew up dirt-poor, the son of an Arkansas sharecropper. He served in the Army, sold vacuum cleaners, and then signed on with Sun records in 1955. In the early sixties he became addicted to drugs and alcohol, his first marriage fell apart, and he served time in Folsom prison. Then in the late sixties Johnny Cash his life was changed by a woman. He discovered June Carter and Jesus Christ in that order. With the help of his new wife and faith in Jesus Christ he kicked drugs and alcohol and got his life back on course. I like Johnny Cash.

---

In the late sixties I heard him sing an unforgettable song.

*Jesus met the woman at the well,  
An' she told him ev'rything she ever done.  
He said, "Woman, tell me, where is your husband?"  
And the woman said to Jesus, "I have none."  
"Oh, woman, oh, woman, you have three husbands.  
An' the one that you have is not your own."  
"Oh, this man..." she said,  
This man, this man, this man, he's a prophet,  
'Cause he told me ev'rything I ever done."*

When I hear Cash sing that song I'm reminded of a woman I met years ago, not at the well, but in the heart of Appalachia. She was in her mid thirties but could easily get an Ames Senior citizen discount card without being asked her age. She'd been married several times to abusive, alcoholic husbands. They'd come home drunk and slap her around saying, "It's not my fault, it's yours." She began to believe it was her fault. So she bounced from one husband to another until she ended up with a man who saw no need to formalize their living arrangements

with a marriage ceremony. You'd think a woman like that – a hard, tough woman wouldn't be caught dead in the company of Jesus. But she was a good woman and she loved Jesus. She was making the best of a bad hand she'd been dealt. the story of Jesus and the woman at the well reminds me of her. Jesus had a way with women. He was a ladies man. We Christians haven't always paid close attention to how Jesus treated women.

*But before we get to how Jesus treated the Samaritan woman notice, first, that the story takes place in Samaria.* That's like telling a story about an Israeli Jew that takes place in the Palestinian city of Gaza. Samaria represents anyplace we travel that places us in danger of people who differ from us. High school students tell me there are some tables in the cafeteria, some high school cliques, where you're not welcomed and where you'll be harassed. That's your Samaria. Samaria represents the part of any town you wouldn't walk through by yourself. Samaria represents groups of people you wouldn't want your son or daughter to choose a spouse from. Samaria also represents groups within a church or presbytery who treat us with hostility because we think, vote and believe differently than they do. Jesus could have avoided Samaria. Most Jews traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem avoided it like the plague even though it meant a long detour. But Jesus traveled through Samaria as a visible demonstration that "God so loves (a) world" that includes our Samaritans.

*But, secondly, and before we get to how Jesus interacted with the Samaritan woman, notice that Jesus "tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well."* Jesus had to travel through a 30-mile corridor to get to Judea – thirty tortuous mountain miles on foot. If he'd started at sunrise he'd already walked six hours. The day was hot and the air was dry. Some of you have hiked in Scouts or gone on long marches in the Army or Marines and will appreciate how tired and thirsty Jesus felt. Have you ever wondered if God has any idea what it's like to walk for

hours in the heat of the day, or to work all day on an assembly line or mushroom house? Does God have any idea how tired you get waiting on tables or teaching a roomful of rowdy children? Has God ever had to get up early to unlock the door of his business and stand all day with customers who aren't always kind? The Gospel claims that God does get tired. No Gospel writer stressed the deity of Christ more than John – but none insists more strenuously on his real humanity. Early Christians argued over the nature of Jesus. Some Christians claimed that Jesus only seemed to be human. Jesus never really got tempted, angry, depressed, hungry, thirsty, tired or sleepy. He only seemed to. The writer of the Gospel claims that Jesus really got tired and thirsty. When we see Jesus tired and thirsty we see all the tired men and women of the world thirsty for God as well as physical water. But we also see the thirst of a suffering God. In one of his poems, Studdert-Kennedy prays -

*Father, if He, the Christ, were Thy Revealer,  
~~Truly the First Begotten of the Lord,~~  
Then must Thou be a Sufferer and a Healer,*

*Finally, we get to the relationship Jesus developed with the Samaritan woman.* The church has often treated women more like the Taliban than Jesus did. At the time of Jesus Jewish men and women rarely spoke to one another in public. Unmarried men and women weren't permitted to meet privately. Women couldn't initiate a divorce no matter how abusive a husband.<sup>1</sup> *relate to Samaritan women* Women weren't taught the Law of God. The Rabbi Eleazar wrote, "It would be better for the words of the Law to be burned than to be taught to a woman. Better to teach her lasciviousness." Women couldn't constitute a quorum for worship and were separated from men in synagogues. A woman's testimony wasn't permitted in court. Every pious Jewish man prayed, "Praise be to God that I was not created a woman." The Jewish historian Josephus wrote, "In every respect woman is inferior to man."

Jesus ignored these customs. Privately Jesus met, spoke and taught a *woman*, a *Samaritan* woman, a woman of *questionable reputation*. The disciples were *astonished* to discover Jesus speaking with a Woman. Jesus was breaking down barriers dividing men and women. It's amazing to see the kind of affect a woman who has met Jesus can have on her community. The Samaritan woman returned to her village to bear witness to Jesus, and people believed her testimony. I think of a more recent Samaritan woman empowered by Jesus to change a nation. Back in December of 1955 a bus driver in Montgomery, Alabama ordered four people in a bus to move to the back. One was a woman, a tired department store clerk on her way home from work. Rosa Parks spoke so softly that it was hard to hear her voice over the noise of the bus. What she said to the bus driver was, "No," and a wall came tumbling down (Taylor Branch, *Parting The Waters*...as quoted by Long). The testimony of a woman empowered by Jesus Christ can change the world.

Finally, I want to highlight something I've already said. Jesus talked and listened to the Samaritan woman. How often I've heard wives say to me, "My husband doesn't talk to me. He doesn't listen. He sits there and reads the paper, he watches the TV, talks with his friends but doesn't say a word to me. I might as well be married to a log." Jesus talked and listened to women as well as men. He didn't heal the Samaritan woman of any disease. He didn't raise her child from the dead as he once did for a widowed mother. He didn't heal the pain of five broken marriages nor did he say anything more about the man she was living with. He simply talked to her and listened (Tom Long). We have a lot to learn from Jesus.

*Let us pray: O God, the fountain of life, to a humanity parched with thirst you offer the living water of grace which springs up from the rock, our Savior Jesus Christ. Grant your people the gift of your Spirit that we may learn to profess our faith with courage and announce with joy the wonder of your love. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.*