

Have you ever had an encounter with someone, or something, that transformed your life or at least changed your outlook on life? Since you are sitting in Church today, I'm guessing that many of you would answer this question with a yes! If your answer is a no, however, perhaps you have at least witnessed an individual make a significant adjustment to their existence in a movie, a TV show, or a book. Just look at our Gospel narrative for instance.

After hearing it read, we are aware that it is about a Samaritan woman and her encounter with Jesus at Jacob's well. We see that her meeting with Christ at a local watering hole not only changes her, but it becomes a transforming event in her life that is so momentous that it may even inspire us to turn over a new leaf. In fact, throughout the New Testament we read about numerous people and how they are changed when Christ enters into their lives: fishermen become disciples, lepers are made clean, demoniacs are set free from possession, the dead are brought back to life physically and spiritually.

As I was reflecting on today's story, I began to wonder about the encounters that I have had with Jesus in my life. More often than not, I have been most aware of His presence during times of struggle, moments of hardship, like when my former wife Lyndsay was battling cancer, or when I had to leave my first congregation because they could no longer afford two pastors. Of course, I have also noticed the Lord with me whenever I was celebrating joyous events in life, such as my call to become your Pastor here at First Lutheran, or when hearing the good news of an answered prayer in a friend's life.

Today's narrative also made me curious about the encounters all of you have had with Jesus in your lives. I'm sure that I could probably sit down with each of you, and you would be able to tell me how Jesus, or the presence of God's love, has shaped you in some way. Perhaps he has helped you overcome an addiction of some kind, maybe you were comforted through a friend during a time of loss,

perhaps you were given the good news of hope during a time when you felt hopeless or felt like the world was out to get you, maybe you met a new friend during a time when you felt lonely.

Although we see in John's narrative that a Samaritan woman is indeed transformed through her encounter with Christ, I would like to share with you another true story about transformation. By the time John Rockefeller was fifty-three years old, his life was a wreck. Throughout his business career he said, "I never placed my head upon the pillow at night without reminding myself that my success might only be temporary." He was the richest man in the world and yet he was miserable in every sense of the word. He was sick physically, mentally, and emotionally. There was no humor, balance, or joy in his life.

Then a transformation occurred. He determined to become a giver rather than an accumulator. He began to give his millions away. He founded the Rockefeller Foundation, dedicated to fighting disease and ignorance around the world. He lived to be ninety-seven years old and was a happy man in those years because of his new and revitalized definition of success.

Getting back to today's story, we observe Jesus sitting down with a woman at a well and asking her for a drink of water. At first glance, it seems like an innocent thing to do. He and his disciples had been traveling, it was probably very hot, because it was the middle of the afternoon, and while his disciples are off getting food he sits down to rest. I'm sure that you and I would have done the exact same thing if we had been in his position. Yet, if we look at the social customs of that time we see that Jesus' request, "Give me a drink," was a violation of those customs.

His encounter with the Samaritan woman is rather surprising because he crosses certain boundaries. First of all, a typical Jew would not drink out of a Samaritan cup, since they considered all Samaritans unclean. Secondly, it was

improper for a man to talk to a woman in public, let alone a stranger. This is supported when the disciples return later in the story, and they are astonished that Jesus is speaking with a woman. Perhaps more threatening than any of Jesus' other acts, he breaks down the socially acceptable dividing walls between males and females, and between Jews and Samaritans. He completely transforms the social traditions of his day, a common theme throughout the Gospels.

Although this encounter at Jacob's well is a bit surprising to the woman, who at first doesn't seem to understand how a Jewish man would dare ask her for a drink, Jesus had stimulated her curiosity and captured her attention. The surprises don't stop there however, because after he asks her for water their conversation becomes even more intriguing to the Samaritan. When she asks Jesus, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" he responds with a very puzzling and cryptic message. "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."

So, what do you think Jesus is trying to accomplish here in his conversation with this woman? If we look deeper at his response, we see that he is in some sense issuing two challenges to her. Challenge number one: he is trying to help her understand who it is she is actually speaking to. He wants her to recognize that he is the son of God, the Messiah. The second challenge issued is that Jesus wants her to ask for the living water that he possesses.

Of course, we might wonder, why does the woman need to ask for this gift of living water? Couldn't Jesus just give it to her?" For some of us, this asking language can be a little uncomfortable, because it might easily lead to the idea that salvation can be based on something we do. On the other hand, the only reason she would ask –or open herself to the Lord's gift- is because Jesus has offered the invitation to ask. After all, we don't normally answer the phone unless it rings, or

open the door unless someone knocks. Such responses are evoked by ringing or knocking. So also, the woman's response to Jesus was evoked by his words to her.

We see that during her encounter with Jesus he helps the woman ask for living water, which she does. This was the second of Jesus' challenges. Yet, she continues to have an earthly understanding about the water. Her desire for the water seems to be motivated by the thought that she wouldn't have to come to the well anymore. She has not fully understood what Jesus is offering. Most likely when she heard him mention living water, she was thinking of running water as opposed to a cistern or a well. Perhaps she thought Jesus would show her a stream, or a better location to get her water from. The woman's question, "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?" shows that she does not understand the first thing about who Jesus is.

But we the readers of today's Gospel aren't much further ahead of her –we know that Jesus is in fact greater than Jacob, but we are not exactly clear what the symbolism of water refers to. Could it be, Grace? Revelation? The Spirit? Jesus never fills in the blanks for us –the imagery is left for us to ponder over, and we are never really given a right or wrong answer. Where Jesus is offering a life of grace, she sees only the freedom from household drudgery.

Throughout their conversation the woman is clueless as to who Jesus is, until he asks her to go and get her husband and reveals to her that he knows her better than she thinks. And the question Jesus poses to her about her personal life allows her to see that he is a prophet. When he mentions that she has had five husbands, it may cause us to wonder if he was trying to point out her sinfulness, but notice that their discussion doesn't continue to revolve around sin. I believe he mentions her husbands not to highlight the woman's past life (sinful or not), but he is simply reinforcing his ability to see inside her heart. He is indicating to this lady, who in all sense and purposes should be a stranger to him, that he does in fact know her!

The woman's response to the miraculous knowledge that Jesus has demonstrated is to ask him a question about the proper place of worship, and this moves her back toward the crucial issue of Jesus' identity. I have had similar experiences in my own life, because whenever I have told a stranger that I am a pastor, suddenly our conversation begins to take on a religious tone. They might say something like, "I try to keep the Commandments, or I know I should go to church more often..." This is what the woman does after recognizing Jesus as a prophet. Eventually in their discussion we see that the idea of worship has been transformed by God's new work in Jesus. The issue is now not a place, but "spirit and truth," both of which are to be found in Jesus.

So, how does the Samaritan respond to her conversation with Jesus? How does she respond to her encounter with Christ? She leaves her jug behind and runs back to her village to tell everyone. What stands out to me in this story is the fact that the woman drops what she is doing and runs to declare the good news to her people, even though we see that she still has some doubt. She enters into the village and says, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" Yet, even in her doubt she is unable to keep the experience that she had with Jesus to herself. In the end we see that this woman has gone from an outcast to an evangelist, spreading the Good News. Many of the people of the city believed because of her testimony.

Today's story is a wonderful example of what Evangelism is all about. For many of us, evangelism, or harvesting, can be something we don't want to do because it can seem tiring, and it can be hard work. A colleague of mine named Brian Stoffregen writes, "The impression I get from many church people is that they expect the 'fish' to just jump into the boat rather than working at catching them. If the harvest is plentiful and ripe as Jesus says, and if our population is continually increasing, then why are the numbers decreasing in so many

congregations? Perhaps we haven't been willing to look around and see what is right outside our doors. Perhaps we haven't been willing to put forth the labor and share the labor to bring in the harvest."

Whatever the reasons, the one Samaritan woman who had just met Jesus, who misunderstands what he says, who has questions about his identity, brings more people to Jesus than countless lifelong disciples. Many of us seem to understand that sharing the good news is a time consuming and demanding task, and this can be seen in decreased membership in congregations throughout our country. The Samaritan woman shares her encounter with a joyful heart, and she doesn't allow her doubts to keep her from bringing others to Christ. Similarly, we too have the unique opportunity to share our own stories of our Lord's transforming presence in our lives with others. Perhaps if we are willing to do this, they too can experience a powerful change in their lives as well! Thanks be to God. Amen.