

Witness: Welling Up to Eternal Life

John 4:3-15

Discipleship Essentials - Part Three: Becoming Like Christ

Dr. Douglas A. Learned

Sunday, June 10, 2007

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

When the choir sings like that, we are lulled into prayer. Thank you. This morning I want to start with a great big thank you to all of you for your congratulations to me these past few weeks upon my graduation with a Doctor of Ministry degree. I am grateful for all of your calls and all of your cards, and I am especially thankful for all of your baked goods. They've been delicious. I'm still adjusting to that title. Whenever someone addresses me as Dr. Learned, I have this tendency to look over my shoulder to see if my uncle, the anesthesiologist, is in the room. It's a good thing I have Pastor Junior around to keep me humble. She calls me Dr. Doug. And what Junior says goes in my book. So Dr. Doug it is. And in honor of Father's Day, I tried to convince my children that they need to call me Dr. Daddy. They haven't gone for it yet.

Let's pray. In this moment, dear Lord, once we hear your Word proclaimed, help us to put down everything in this world that puffs us up. We are not worthy to receive your grace, but you grant it to us nonetheless. And by this gift of grace, you draw us in to serve as witnesses to the power of Jesus, who leads us by his forgiving ways to abundant and everlasting life. Amen.

As I was studying this passage this past week from the Gospel of John, it occurred to me that at least twelve sermons could come out of it. It is so richly packed with meaning and application to the Christian life. But this sermon I want to focus on this morning is about giving witness – witness to the power of Jesus' name. And specifically I want to talk about how it is that God uses us as witnesses to draw people closer to Jesus, not by our own power but by the Lord's power.

In the background of our passage this morning are two mountains. One is Mount Zion, the mount on which Jerusalem sits, and the other is Mount Gerizim, in the north, in a region called Samaria. Mount Zion is the center of Jewish worship, and Mount Gerizim is the center for Samaritan worship. Two peoples, and so two centers of power. Both claim Jacob patriarch of their faith. Jesus, as a Jew, recognizes Mount Zion as the center of Israel's worship, but in a way unique among his own people, he doesn't shy away from engaging Samaritans. In fact, he seeks them out. He speaks well of them, as he did in the parable of the Good Samaritan. This go-anywhere-and-talk-to-anyone-about-God attitude, regardless of status or origin, remains at the core of Christian missions today, as evidenced by our own members traveling on missions this summer.

Jesus is traveling from the region of Judea north to the region of Galilee, and on the way he stops at the well and does the unthinkable: He says to her, "Give me a drink." And she responds, "How is it that you, a Jew, asks me, a Samaritan, for a drink of water?" This just doesn't take place. And that is where they enter into this dance of words and dialogue in which Jesus so brilliantly contrasts the water that she draws from that well to the living water that we receive from him in faith. It's poignant language Jesus uses to speak to his ministry and mission. John 6:35: "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." And what does he say here in Verse 14: "The water that I give them will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Different Bibles translate that phrase "welling up" in different ways. Some say "gushing up." It's never quite sounded right to me. When I think of Presbyterians, I don't think of people who gush. Presbyterians might well up, but they would never gush, right? But either word that you use, whether it's gushing up or welling up, we get the point – the water is moving, the spirit is in and through it, it's alive, not stagnant. There's something happening.

A number of years ago I took a tour of the Holy Land with thirty pastors with whom I had attended seminary. Imagine in your mind for a minute thirty pastors sitting on a bus together all day long every day for ten days. And each and every one of us was a leader, who at any moment had an opinion about what the group should be doing and how it should be doing it. Not a follower in the bunch. The professor leading the tour said it was like herding cats. The last stop on our tour was at the location mentioned in this passage, called Jacob's Well. It was a special moment when even we thirty felines were unified in purpose to ponder the scene of the passage of the woman and Jesus in this very place. As our leader lifted a bucket out of that well and each of us took a drink from it, I reflected on what it means for us to drink of the living water that comes from Jesus.

For even as Jesus drank from that well, he said to the woman, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again. But anyone who drinks of the living water that I give them will never be thirsty again." Those words of Jesus reminded me of the water I'd experienced earlier in that tour when I'd traveled through a forested area north of Galilee. The water falls from the sky to the top of Mount Hermon and then goes down the side of the mountain into streams which form tributaries to the Jordan River and runs down the Jordan to the very spot where John was baptizing people who wanted to follow in the way of God. I imagine Jesus had such images in his mind when he spoke of living water.

So whether it's gushing up or welling up or bubbling down the stream, the deeper meaning remains the same. Jesus gives witness to a woman that society says he shouldn't be talking to, about the power of God to change her life. Answering the question, he knows the Spirit of God is welling up within her heart and mind. "Where can I find God? Is it on this mountain, or that mountain? Mount Zion, or Mount Gerizim?" But in that brilliant exchange, Jesus answers the question in verse 41: "The time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain or that mountain, but in spirit and in truth." In spirit and in truth. The two key ingredients to Christian witness. For us to give effective witness to those who do not believe or to those who are on the edge of belief, it must be apparent that we are living in the loving Spirit of Christ. Amen?

That has to come through our words and our actions or our witness is completely empty. What drew people to Jesus was the sense that he did not see them merely as a means to an end but that he truly cared for them-- he loved them. When people sense that we care for them, that we love them, they are so much more likely to hear the words that we might have to share with them. And in that Spirit, we must speak the truth. The stakes are so high, so important. These are people's lives we're talking about here. To speak less than the truth of our story when it comes to what God has done in our lives and what we believe God can do in the lives of others, to do anything less is insufficient.

Because the truth of our story is what God has given for us to share, to give witness. We must speak the truth of Jesus in the loving spirit of Jesus. Jesus showed compassion to those he encountered, and through his compassion he revealed the content of his faith. Hear that again. Jesus showed compassion for those he encountered, and through his compassion he revealed the content of his faith. In this way he drew them in, and once drawn in, they drew countless others in as well.

This time of year is one of transition for many of the young people here at our church. I was moved this past week to attend the sixth-grade graduation ceremony of the National Presbyterian School. I was also moved last week in a worship service when we recognized those who are graduating from high school into a new chapter of life. And when I saw those seniors in worship last week, it reminded me of how God drew me through the witness of someone during that very period in my own life.

It's a story of me and Reverend Beelen, who was the pastor of my church that I grew up in, the Christian Reformed Church of St. Joseph, Michigan. Now, Pastor Beelen was not one of my mother's favorite pastors. She thought that his prayers were much too long. Even I at first wasn't too excited to attend the Heidelberg Catechism class that he taught to the ninth graders every year, but I went to that class dutifully, and I learned the Heidelberg Catechism, all the questions and answers. I took that class, and I asked a lot of questions, but I did not make my confession of faith during that time when I was in high school at that church. It was during that time that I took an interest in the study of philosophy instead of the study of theology. I was more interested in Socrates and Plato than I was in Jeremiah and Paul. And after catechism class, Pastor Beelen and I kind of lost touch for the rest of my high-school years.

But a couple of weeks before I left town to go to college, I got a call, and it was him on the other end of the line. I have to say that that call was kind of awkward. I remember being kind of cool and distant to him on the phone, even as he asked me to take me out to lunch. I reluctantly agreed. And folks, that was one of the longest lunches I think I've ever had. Because the whole time that he was asking me about my plans for college, and what my hobbies were, and what my friends were doing, and how my family was doing, I knew that he had that question in the back of his mind. And wouldn't you know, just as the check arrived at the table at the end of the meal, he struck. "So, Doug, how are you with Jesus?"

There was a pause. I took a breath. And I answered in a way that is remarkable to me now; it sounds so sophomoric. "Do you want to know the truth?" And then he paused, and he took a breath, and he kind of looked at me and said, "Yes. I want to know the truth."

"I'm not so sure," I said. And I proceeded to talk about all my other readings and how I wasn't so sure Jesus was the only truth out there. The conversation paused again awkwardly. And then he drew me in. He said, "Doug, you're going to go off to college soon. And you're going to read all kinds of amazing and interesting books, and you're going to talk to all kinds of amazing and brilliant people. And in all those readings, and in all those conversations, I just ask one thing of you: Keep your mind open to Jesus." And with that simple request, he prayed for me, paid the lunch tab, and dropped me off at my home.

I had spent thirty Sunday mornings sitting through those catechism classes with Pastor Beelen, learning the content of the Christian faith, content that set the stage for my life's work in the ministry. But it was that one request that he made to me over lunch that sparked my own sincere interest in all of that content that I had memorized about the Christian faith. It was that one request that began to make the faith of Jesus become mine. He knew me enough to know the one thing I valued most of all in that period of my life was keeping an open mind. And he used that one opening to speak of Jesus. Smart man. And three years later – it took some time, I'm kind of hard-headed – I finally opened my mind to Jesus. And once he was in my mind, he traveled down into my heart. We know the rest of the story.

God has a stronger will than me. Thanks be to God. My friends, I don't know what kind of openings God is making in the lives of people around you or in your own life in this very moment. But let me say this: The loving spirit of Jesus is ready now to enter in. God knows our thirst. Let us pray.

Eternal Father, help us drink of Jesus, our living water. Quench our thirst for life abundant and life everlasting through the hearing and telling his story. Open, we pray, our hearts and minds to welcome Jesus in, and having welcomed him in, make his story our own story to share with the world. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.