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The National Presbyterian Church

An Unhappy Woman: No Reason to Hide

John 4:1-42

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In our sermons through the fall we are looking together at the story of Jesus as we find it recorded for us in the gospel according to Saint John, one of four accounts that we have in Scripture which tell us about Jesus' life and Jesus' ministry. We are focusing in particular on Jesus' interaction with people whose lives cross path, intersect, with Jesus' life, and in that intersection their lives are changed by Jesus.

In our series so far, we have read through the first three chapters of John and we now begin Chapter 4. Along the way, we have discovered that all kinds of people have found their lives crossing path with Jesus' life, and His life has touched each one of them at their point of need.

- So, for example, we have seen Jesus' interaction with a great wild prophet of a man down by the Jordan River, perhaps the most popular religious figure of the first century – a man by the name of John the Baptist. And even though he was immensely popular, right at the top of the list, this powerful man found his joy, found his purpose in life not in being first, not in being number one, but in being *second place* to Jesus! He humbled his life before Jesus, saying 'he (Jesus) must increase and I must decrease' (Jn.3:30). And in getting that relationship right, he told his disciples, he had found his joy and purpose. So we've seen Jesus meeting with John the Baptist.
- And then we've seen Jesus meeting with four country boys: Andrew and Simon and Nathaniel and Phillip from up north in Galilee, close to Nazareth where Jesus was raised. These country boys know who Jesus is. They have all the titles right. But they don't know Jesus. They know about Him but they don't know Him directly until they go and meet with him. And they discover that even though He is the King of Israel, though he is the Messiah, the Son of God, nevertheless, he has time for them! *For them!* Their lives interact with his life and in that interaction they come to know not just about him (and many people stop there – they know all about him), but they come to know him directly and in that knowledge they find their lives are changed and they become very close followers of His indeed.

- And then we have seen Jesus interact with His own mother. Not as a child with a mother but as an adult with a mother. The two of them are together, along with Jesus' disciples and many other people, at a wedding in a small town called Cana not too far from Nazareth where Jesus was raised. They are at the wedding party after the vows had been made. The wedding is supposed to last for a few days, but far too quickly the wine runs out. It's a social disaster. The young couple whose wedding it is will be put to shame in that small community unless something is done. And Jesus' mother turns to Jesus and tells Jesus to do something. And Jesus pushes her off just a little bit and says in effect, "wait! I'll help but not on your terms, only on my terms." And then he does it. He does it. So Mary has her finger on Jesus pulse! She knows that he has a streak of loving kindness in him that does not want this couple to be embarrassed. She knows that he notices the small things, and small people in life, and uses his power to meet people where they are in their moment of need.

And then Jesus goes into action. He takes 6 jars of water and he turns the water into wine so that the party can go on. And not only 'go on' through the time that it was meant to last, but forever and ever. You see, enough wine is made from the water to last forever and ever: gallons and gallons of it – as if Jesus is saying not only to the couple at the wedding but to you and me, that he can take whatever water there is in our lives and turn it into wine so that our lives will be blessed, so that we can live life as a celebration of the loving and powerful presence of God – now and throughout all eternity.

So Jesus is there with his mother and they interact together. And she sees him at work on behalf of others in a small loving kindness touch and then with the power of his miracle.

- And then last Sunday we looked together at a person who is completely different. Down now in the city of Jerusalem. We've been up north in Galilee, a rural area. We move down south to the big city of Jerusalem and there in Jerusalem Jesus interacts with a powerful person. An educated person. A sophisticated person. A city person. His name is Nicodemus, and he is a part of the powerful group of Jewish people ruling the land under the authority of the Romans. A religious man who should know God as well as know about God. But he has more questions than answers. When he sees Jesus at work he has this inkling that God is at work through Jesus even though Jesus is an uneducated peasant. But he is afraid. He is afraid of his friends. He is afraid of what they will say if he goes and talks to Jesus: 'how could you even think of talking to this country boy? He's from up north!' [DR: Or, we might here say, 'he's from down south' or 'out west']. 'How could you go and think about speaking to this country preacher? We don't like that idea at all!' That's what they would have said to him. So he comes to Jesus by night, afraid, and talks to Jesus who is willing to talk to him and to all kinds of people. And speaks to him about a

new birth (John 3:3-7): “You must be born from above. You must be born again. You must be born by the spirit.”

And Nicodemus leaves at the end of the conversation changed – but not with some dramatic twist or about-turn in his life; not with some dramatic conversion. In fact, the story of Nicodemus is the story of a slow change in which we see him moving from one sphere of influence (with all his colleagues) to another (Jesus and his followers). It’s like changing households – by the end of the story he’s been ‘born again’ into a new household, a new family. Literally at the end of John’s gospel, he is one of those remaining at the cross of Jesus when others flee, scared. He is one of those who take Jesus’ body down from the cross and place the body with tender care in the tomb. His was a life transformed slowly but surely by the Spirit of God – forever. So this is who we looked at last week, Nicodemus.

A SAMARITAN WOMAN. And this week once again we look at a completely different person as Jesus interacts this time with a woman he meets by a well in a lonely place outside of a city called Sychar, not far from another city called Shechem, while traveling from Jerusalem back up north.

So Jesus has gone from Galilee, his home, down to the big city of Jerusalem. And now he’s heading north again, and he has to go through that area that we would now call the West Bank. And there on the West Bank you find the ancient region of Samaria still sometimes called Samaria to this day.

And so Jesus is at this well with his disciples. They are worn out, they are weary, they are tired. It’s the middle of the day. Jesus sends his disciples off to find food in one of the local communities and he’s by the well, all by himself when a woman appears. In the heat of the day this woman appears, coming to get water. And they strike up a conversation with each other, a conversation which like all these other conversations we’ve looked at in John, will change her life forever.

But this is a strange setting for this conversation. It’s a strange setting because it is the middle of the day and because this woman is alone. Nobody in those days came to get water in the middle of the day. Why would you do that when the sun was at its hottest? And nobody would come to get water alone. Fetching water, as in some countries to this day, tends to be woman’s work, done as an act of community together – talking, walking, singing, dancing – whatever it is, together as they come. And here is this woman and she is by herself. As if she wants to be by herself. As if she wants to come to this well and meet nobody there. As if she has been told that she does not belong to the others. As if she’s on the outside and others are on the inside: you are not one of us.

And there are some reasons which we find in our scripture reading, a number of reasons why she might have felt this way – that she didn’t belong, she wasn’t quite in, she wasn’t quite one of the crowd. She was on the outside.

She was a Samaritan. From a Jewish point of view, for example this woman had a major strike against her, which left her on the outside rather than on the inside; and that was simply this: that she was a Samaritan - a particular distinct religious group of people (some are still living today, by the way in a town called Nablus) who differed in what they believed from the Jewish people, the larger, majority group of people who surrounded them. They differed in particular about their view of the Bible and in particular about what the Bible said about the holiest place on the face of the Earth.

For the Jews, the Bible comprised of three parts. Our Old Testament comprised of three parts. There was the Law, what we call the Torah, the books of Moses. There were the prophets that include the history of Israel and the writings of the Major Prophets and the Minor Prophets. And there were what we call the Writings. The wisdom literature of ancient Israel. The Psalms, the Proverbs and other books like that. And these particular books comprised the Jewish Bible. If you wanted to find a reference in the Jewish Bible to the holiest place of all and you wanted it to reference Jerusalem and Mount Zion on which the temple was built in particular, you would find **no** reference at all in the books of Moses. You find those references in the Prophets and the Writings.

And the Samaritans would say to the Jews that they were the ones who had added to God's word: as if to say, 'God's word is only the word that comes to us from Moses. And if you read the books of Moses you will find that the only sacred mountain in the book is Mt. Gerizim, not Mt. Zion where the temple was built in Jerusalem. But this mountain, Mt Gerizim, which actually towered over the well where Jesus was talking to this woman, a mountain that many of us have never heard off before (Mt Gerizim, of which we may have never heard . . . but Mt. Gerizim was a holy place and the Samaritans built their own temple there, *in opposition to the Jewish temple Jerusalem*. In fact, their temple stood on Mt Gerizim until the year 128 B.C. when the Jewish leader John Hyacanus came and destroyed it.

Now if you want to think of the tension that was felt at that moment, all you need to think of would be, for example, an action by the Israelis destroying the AlAqsa Mosque on the temple mount in Jerusalem to this day. Think about the consequences of such an action: would the feeling of hate and outrage die down in a week or ten days or two weeks or a year or a decade or decades or a century? This feeling of enmity was as strong when Jesus sat at the well as it had been a hundred years before.

So there was enmity between the Samaritans and the Jews. And this woman was on the wrong side and she had this strike against her, from a Jewish point of view - simply by being a Samaritan. So she was on the outside, 'she didn't quite belong' -- 'strike one' against her was that she was a Samaritan. But there was more to it than that.

She was a Woman. Strike two was that she had the wrong birth! She had the wrong background! She had the wrong upbringing! Quite simply... strike two was that she was a woman! She was a woman in a society in which to be a woman was at times regarded as less than being fully human and certainly at times not worth engaging with. We see this attitude come into play explicitly in our story when the disciples return from getting food in the city where they have gone. Remember, they left Jesus alone. But now he is talking with this woman. And the disciples return. They come back and in John 4:27 we read that when the disciples returned "*they were astonished* [DR: they were shocked] *that Jesus was speaking with a woman. But no one said what do you want or why are you speaking with her*" . . . but you know they wanted to say it! It was on the tip of their tongues and they wanted to say it and you know that the woman could feel it as she had probably felt it on many other occasions.

To those disciples she was the wrong kind of person for Jesus to be speaking to. He shouldn't be associating with her. He shouldn't be taking her seriously – though clearly he was. He was engaged in this conversation. How could that possibly be?

It could have been just the same . . . if they had focused on her race.
It could have been just the same . . . if they had focused on her accent
or her age.

Remember the disciples got upset with Jesus on one occasion for speaking with children. Why would you have time for them? They are not quite one of us (Matthew 10:14).

It could have been just the same because of her height or her weight or her education...

But in her case the strike against her was her gender. Something beyond her control that others use to judge her by and to exclude her. And that was strike two.

Strike One: She's not one of us, doesn't belong, because she has the *wrong beliefs*, the wrong religion.

Strike Two: She's not one of us, doesn't belong, because of her upbringing, because of *her birth*.

And then Strike Three. Not one of us, doesn't belong, because she was *morally suspect*.

She was Morally Suspect. 'Suspect,' not just to Jews or Christians, not just to men in the past or the present, but to just about everybody. To men and women, Jew and Gentile now and then. You see she had been married, not just once if you remember the story. Not just twice, not just three times, not just four times, but she had been *married five times*, and the person she was living with was not her husband (Jn. 4:18). And that almost automatically has led people reading this story to assume the looseness of her morality, that it was all her fault for this repeated failure, her inability to stay in committed relationships even though

(and this needs to be pointed out – read the story again) there is nothing explicit in the story, in John Chapter 4 that says that it was her fault. In fact Baptist scholar Linda Bridges has suggested this possibility. She writes:

Maybe her five husbands found her lacking, unsuitable, unlovely, unfit for their desires and they simply rid themselves of responsibility and relationship [DR: After all back in those days the only people who had the right to divorce were the men. Could not be initiated by the woman]. What if the woman needed redemption not from the excesses of promiscuity but from a series of injustices from five husbands? ¹

Maybe she had been abused just like 10 to 25 percent – the statistics vary, but from the Centers for Disease Control in July 2000

[see <http://www.dvrc-or.org/domestic/violence/resources/C61/>]

10 to 25 percent of all women in the United States at some time in their life, it's estimated, will be abused in one way or another. And like many abused women, maybe she couldn't stop herself from going from one abusive relationship to another? And why? Well, because what is commonly experienced by women in that kind of situation is the sense that somehow it's their fault. And so they move from one to another and they cannot escape this cycle of destruction.

The truth of course is that with the woman at the well, we just don't know what was going on in the background. We are not told who is to blame – but what we do know is that she was 'damaged goods' and that she was all alone, and that what should have been a communal event with the other women in the community (fetching water) was not. So she was 'not one of us,' 'not one of them,' 'didn't belong.'

All kinds of strikes against her: her religion, her birth, her upbringing, her moral circumstances, too many to count. And yet... what she discovered at the well that day was this man sitting there unexpectedly. This man who didn't count any of these things as strikes against her, but treated her as an equal – treated her as important, entered into conversation with her. Even though he knew everything about her. Every single thing about her. He could see straight through her... and he loved her anyway. There was no hint of condemnation which surely she'd experienced again and again, from every direction. He really *cared*. He *really* cared!

About ten years ago I was at a retreat in Shakertown near Lexington, Kentucky when I heard the news of the death of an older friend, Bob Buxbaum. But was a Presbyterian minister but he earned his living as a therapist in San Antonio. When I knew him we were living in San Antonio. Ten years, or so, later, when I heard the news of his death it was one of those few occasions that I can remember where I spontaneously began to cry. I don't usually do it. It's part of my daily work to help folks who are passing through grief. But this time I couldn't help it. When I heard the news, I had to leave the room and my mind raced back to the early 1990s when I knew him – back to the time when our paths crossed, our lives intersected each other's.

The moment I was drawn back to first was on the steps of the Civic Center in Laredo, Texas. I know this sounds like a country and western song . . . But this is really where we were! We were on the steps of the Civic Center in Laredo, Texas and (to ruin the country song) inside the Civic Center there was actually a Presbytery meeting going on (I've never heard a country song which speaks about a Presbytery meeting). So I was escaping from the Presbytery meeting for a few moments on the steps outside the meeting hall – and there was Bob Buxbaum standing there. And he turned to me. He turned to me and said 'well how are things going?' And I took a risk. I looked at him and I decided to say to him "You know, Bob, they're not going too well. They're not going too well in my marriage. They're not going too well in my family. They're not going too well in my work just now!" (As some wag put it, my middle age crisis was meeting my children entering puberty! And when you get that clash coming together something happens in life).

And he said something very simple. He said "Do you want to talk about it?" That's all he said.

"Do you want to talk about it?" And I told him yes. In fact, with my whole being I said "Yes I want to talk about it!" And for the next six months we set up times in which we talked about it together.

And when I heard about his death I cried because I realized as I'm not sure I had done before, that those conversations in which he listened – I did most of the talking, he listened, he gave some advice along the way, he never blamed me once, he held me to account to be the person God wanted me to be. But I realized that through those conversations that he helped save my marriage. He helped save my family. He helped save my life.

And I think that that is how that Samaritan woman felt as she left the well that day, with a spring in her step that she had not felt in years. She bounces away from the well, straight back into the town from which she comes and she enters into conversation with people whom she was trying to avoid or they were trying to avoid her. She unabashedly engages them in conversation. She finds herself in community again, and she spouts out to them what's going on inside: "Come and see a man who told me everything that I've ever done, [and the unspoken part: "without condemning me!"] Maybe he's the Messiah?" (John 4:29) . . . the Messiah, the leader, the King *that I need* in my brokenness with all these strikes against me. And *that you need* even though you look as if you have it all together! Maybe he's the one? And she says it with such passion that they see her life transformed and they listen and they come. Indeed,

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I had ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him they asked him to stay with them [DR: even though there was enmity between the Samaritans and the Jews, would he even consider

such a thing?) *he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman it is no longer because of what you said that we believe for we have heard for ourselves and we know that this is truly the Savior [DR: not just of the Jews and not just of the Samaritans] but of the world. (John 4:39-42)*

Remember Jesus' words? "God is Spirit and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24)

And all of this happened because Jesus struck up a conversation with a woman whose life crossed paths with his at a well on a day when he was hungry and thirsty and sat down to rest. And she discovered in that conversation her life pouring out, and being filled again before Him.

She remained uncondemned. No matter that she was 'not one of them!' No matter that 'she didn't belong!' No matter that she had so many strikes against her – to Jesus she was a person, real, valued, with whom he, her Messiah, engaged. Do you remember the reading? He said to her:

If you knew the gift of God [that is, that God longs to give you, and every one of us a gift], and who it is that has sent you give me a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water. Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up [DR: and that's what her life was now like wasn't it? gushing up?!] into eternal life [DR: not just life in heaven when we die but life that has the quality of eternity about it right here and now and on forever]. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. (John 4:11, 14)

And this same Jesus living, crucified, dead, buried, raised from the dead, longs to make that same offer to you and me today, no matter how many strikes we have against us. Or even if we have pride enough to think there is no strike against us! He longs to give us a life that feels as if it is filled with water that will never run out, and which will quench our thirst always, just for the asking.

Let us bow before God in prayer. Holy God, still our hearts before you. Not only in this moment, but also in the moments that lie ahead of us in this day, that we might know that you long to enter into conversation with us, conversation in which you do not condemn us, and in which you show us that you know as well – conversation that has the power to change us like this woman at the well.

Amen.

1 Linda M. Bridges, "John 4:5-42," *Interpretation* (April 1994), 173-176.