

What Happens When You Meet Jesus

March 23, 2014

John 4:1-14

If you have ever been on any road leading to Dillon, South Carolina, you are no doubt well aware of the signs that start popping up with cute little sayings from Pedro telling you how much farther it is to a place called *South of the Border*. A tourist trap if there ever was one. I couldn't help but think of Pedro and *South of the Border* as I read a story about Ted and Dorothy.

The depression took the fun out of 1932. It was no time to go into business. But Ted and Dorothy Husted bought the little drug store in their town.

Grasshoppers had eaten all the crops in the region. This, in turn was followed by a dust bowl, a long drought, and temperatures for ten days at a time of over 100 degrees. So the drugstore seemed about to fold.

Ted and Dorothy asked themselves: How can we get people into the drugstore?" They decided on the billboard marketing strategy, just like Pedro. So, they went 25 miles in each direction and put up signs that read, "FREE ICE WATER AT THE WALL DRUG STORE, Wall, S.D."

They put up signs at 10 miles; and at 5 miles the sign read: "HOLD ON! IT'S ONLY 5 MILES TO THE WALL DRUG STORE AND FREE ICE WATER." Sounds just like South of the Boarder, doesn't it?

Well, now there are signs all over the country telling you just how far it is to free ice water at the Wall, S.D. drugstore. Today more than 15,000 people crowd the drugstore on a busy day in a town of 800 people.

It remains the most spectacularly, successful drugstore in the entire industry. Druggists had been handing out free ice water for generations. But Ted & Dorothy were the first people who ever thought of advertising it.

Actually, somebody else came up with an advertisement for free water -- living water! Today's gospel lesson in the 4th chapter of John describes the encounter of Jesus with the woman of Samaria, at a well dug in ancient times by Jacob. Jacob was even buried nearby.

The Samaritans and Jews had a centuries-old feud that centered on religious judgment. 700 years before Jesus, Jewish Samaria had been conquered by the Assyrians. Most of the people had been carried off in captivity.

Those who remained in the land committed (in the opinion of the Jews) the unforgivable act of inter-marrying with the foreigners who moved in. This made the Samaritan descendants half-breed Jews -- totally unacceptable to the racially pure Jews of Galilee.

It was this half-breed race that Jesus encountered at the well. They met from two different worlds -- They shared a moment of conversation. It led to a drink of living water for the woman and a lesson for us about how to minister to people in need in 2014.

I want us to notice in particular the transition of this woman at the well, as her spiritual condition goes from death to life because Jesus met her need.

I'm sure many of you remember when the musical. "Hair" burst on the scene around 50 years ago. It touted, among other things, the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, supposedly a spiritually enlightened time of harmony and understanding.

Well, whatever your views about astrology may be, I think we can all agree that our world in this age we are living in has very little of either harmony or understanding. Spiritual darkness seems to cover our land.

A little boy from a poverty-stricken home once heard his Sunday School teacher say Jesus was the light of the world. He took her remark quite literally. After class, the boy said to his teacher, If Jesus really is the light of the world, I wish He'd come hang out in my alley. It's awful dark where I live.

Of course, he was talking about physical darkness. We are thinking this morning about spiritual darkness.

To live in spiritual darkness is to be alienated from God. The Samaritan woman at the well was blinded from being able to see that she was in darkness. And I must tell you, that has been my experience with many, many people I have encountered over the years.

When people are away from God, they are in such spiritual darkness they don't even suspect how far away from Him they are!

One church that I'm familiar with tried something daring once. For the Children's Time in the service they handed out empty potato sacks and asked each child to bring it back the next week filled with something that would be the basis for the children's sermon.

The daring part was that the minister never knew what was in the sacks until the children were in place and they were handed to him. They called it "The Sermon in the Sack".

One week a child brought a small porcelain woman at the well. Shortly before the service she had a mishap -- and the poor woman's head was liberated from her body. But it made the lesson! What better picture than a broken woman. That was who Jesus met.

And how many broken people are in our community?
Drugs break people;
Families are ripped apart;
Murder, rape, racism, poverty -- the list is endless.
The darkness is pervasive in our society.

Although I'm sure it was a good and helpful thing, it was always somewhat depressing back when you could pick up the News & Record on Monday mornings and see pictures of "Guilford County's Most Wanted" staring at you. I'm not totally sure why they stopped doing that.

This is exactly what Jesus was in the world to deal with. But I want us to notice a very significant thing about that as we think further about today's Gospel lesson.

The significant thing is not that Jesus healed or helped everyone in the world at that moment. The point is He did not shrink back from the one, outcast, low-morals, racially-despised woman who was in front of Him at that moment.

When Jesus saw darkness, he carried His light into the situation. That's what we are to do! One author put it this way:

God needs our light where the world is the darkest. The blacker the night, the greater the need for light. If the light doesn't shine, it's not because of the darkness. Darkness cannot put out a light. If the darkness increases until it is black as a cave, it is still not dark enough to extinguish a light. No one has yet smothered a light by increasing the darkness. Darkness gets darker because the light fails.

When we fail to reflect Christ's light, we let the darkness win.

When Jesus met the woman at the well, she was in darkness, and that darkness separated, or alienated her from God. That is what it means to be lost.

And, knowing that, Jesus did the loving thing -- He confronted the woman with her darkness, and at the same time a spiritual truth was proclaimed.

Jesus took the everyday conversation (May I have a drink, please, and the woman's reply, You talkin' to me?), and then He cut cross-country to spiritual truth.

A hospital chaplain shared with me a time that he stepped into the hospital elevator with two medical technicians, and the one who was near the floor buttons asked, "Are you going all the way to ground level?"

The chaplain replied that he was, and added, "Isn't that where we're all going eventually?"

The young lady replied, "Oh, yeah, I guess so...but I hope it's later than sooner. But then, she continued, if you're in this place, you're flirting with it anyway."

The chaplain replied, "Well, the ground isn't the real worry -- it's what happens after they cover you up that's tricky!"

The med tech looked at him with a puzzled expression. Then recognition came over her face as she realized he was talking about judgment.

She said, "Oh, yeah..." and with that she turned to the other tech. She was not about to get into that discussion. You can expect all kinds of responses when you deliver spiritual truth.

There was something about Jesus that made the woman at the well curious about this living water he was talking about, and she asked for more.

Contrary to some bleak views that teach that nobody wants to know about Jesus, I believe people are generally ready to hear. You have just got to find a way to speak their language.

I think people today are skeptical because they see so many inconsistencies in the lives of professing Christians. But they are not put off by a person who is genuinely living for the Lord of that Gospel.

If they see it in operation in you, they'll naturally want it as well. Maybe the problem isn't with the lost in our world -- maybe we in the church have to get our own lives in order first!

A Trans-World Radio report told about a Russian psychologist who was waiting to immigrate to the United States from the Soviet Union. His testimony:

"Six weeks ago when I came from the Soviet Union was the first time that I heard something positive about God and about faith in God. There are many people like me who are atheists, not because we chose to be atheists, but because we were victims of circumstances. We knew nothing else. And this atheistic teaching was forced upon us. We accepted it because we had nothing else to hear and nothing else to believe. Now, for the first time, I hear something of a positive nature about the Bible, about God, and about faith in God. To tell you the truth, what you believers are saying makes a lot more sense than what the atheistic teachers taught us all those years in the Soviet Union. After six weeks of hearing things about God and about faith, I am now at the place where my heart is crying out to say 'I believe,' but my head says 'you can't believe; you don't understand enough.' Please have patience with people like me."

People genuinely want to be right with God. Sparky Anderson was the manager of the Big Red Machine (the Cincinnati Reds) back in the mid 70's, and the manager of the Detroit Tigers the year that the Tigers won the World Series. He made this open admission in a major Detroit newspaper back in 1984:

“...I'm not lying when I say that this (religion) is so important to me. If I had one great wish, it would be that I could honestly say that I was one of His (God's) people. That's the one emptiness I have. I'd give up all the pennants and all the honors just to know that I was doing right by Him.”

People want the Lord -- they just want to make certain they are getting the real God, and not some fruitcake's religion!

The woman was lost in her darkness when Jesus met her...had a dawn of awakening when Jesus confronted her, and deliverance when Jesus touched her.

The leap of faith took place after the dawn of spiritual awakening. There is a moment when the questions, the doubts, and the hesitation ends, and in the twinkling of an eye, salvation, as we defined it last Sunday, happens.

How do we know this happened to the woman? She forgot everything. She left her water pot -- the very reason she'd come to the well -- and ran to tell everybody about the real water! This lady got her priority in order in a hurry.

This is the true mark of one who is committed to live for Christ. We may disagree on how our faith is to be shared -- but there can be no debate on the fact that we are to live our faith in such a way that people will want what we have. Remember Jesus said: You are to be my witnesses!

Every Christian occupies some kind of a pulpit and preaches some kind of a sermon every day. What an awesome responsibility that is!

Almost everyone has heard of Henry John Heinz and his 57 varieties of pickles. One day after an evangelistic service the speaker turned to him and said, You are a believer, but with all your energy why aren't you up and at it for the Lord? Heinz went home in anger.

But that night he couldn't sleep, and at 4 o'clock in the morning he prayed that God would use him to show others the way of Christ. A day or so later at a meeting of bank presidents, he turned to the man next to him and told him of his joy in knowing Jesus.

His friend looked at him in surprise and said, I knew you were a Christian, I've wondered many times why you never spoke to me about it.

That gentleman became the first of 267 converts -- people of different varieties, from all walks of life -- that Mr. Heinz eventually won to Christ!

Why do so many Christians neglect this terribly important task of the Christian life?

In his novel *The Fall*, Albert Camus tells of a man who spends his life sitting in a bar at the center of Amsterdam, commenting on life as he observes it around him. His comments reveal much about his own nature, but also speak beyond himself:

He said, "I never cross a bridge at night....Suppose, after all, that someone should jump in the water. One of two things -- either you do likewise to fish him out, and in cold weather, you run a great risk! Or you forsake him there and then have to deal with feelings of guilt and angst."

Camus' character has a problem: He is afraid. And just what is he afraid of? Does he fear crossing bridges? Diving into cold water? Not really.

His comments reveal that his real fear is of getting involved, even by chance, in any situation where he might have to make a choice, where he might have to become personally involved in risk taking -- particularly a situation implied by the condition of night.

My Christian friends, there is spiritual darkness all around us. We have the light. We are charged with the responsibility of finding ways to carry the light into our dark society. We must light up even the dark, murky corners where creepy crawly things gather.

But, you know, as that great Presbyterian preacher Vance Havner used to say, When you turn on the light, the creepy crawly things got to scatter!

Will you be involved? If you're hesitant or afraid, consider this -- You can never walk in the dark if you are covered with light.

Somewhere, there is somebody in your world -- right here in this community or in Greensboro or in Guilford County -- someone who needs that relationship with Christ who will probably respond to no person more than to you.

Will you be his witness? It's not my question, it's the Lord's.