

A little love

John 4:1-42

March 27, 2011

(Video by youth Sunday School Class: "Jesus and the Samaritan woman"
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cUSBEQHIIfk>)

God is everywhere ...

Did our Sunday School players get it right? Is this what Jesus was trying to tell the woman he met by a well in Samaria: God is everywhere?

Sure it is! Jesus told her that the time is coming -- indeed, the time is already here! -- when people won't worship God here or there, but here and there and everywhere, because true worship isn't about place. It's about relationship. It's about knowing God and honoring God and worshipping God as God really is.

God is everywhere!

God is in your church and in your office and in your classroom.

God is on a mountaintop in West Virginia and in a cornfield in Iowa.

God is in your kitchen and your bedroom and your car.

God is in Benghazi and Tripoli and Sendai. God is in Baghdad and Madison and Waterloo.

God is everywhere.

But mostly, I think, Jesus wanted this woman to know that God is everywhere, so she would know that God was here, where she was. God was all around her, God was with her, God was for her, a vital part of everything she was and everything she could become. God is all around you, God is with you, God is for you, a vital part of everything you are and everything you may become.

God is everywhere. But to know that God is there, to know that God is here, we have to recognize him. God is everywhere, but even so, we may not notice him. We may not recognize him. We may not know him.

Jesus came among us and shared our common lot, embodying God's word and God's heart, making God accessible, making God available to all of us, but so many of us failed to recognize him. So many of us still fail to recognize him. We are blind to what he wants to show us and deaf to what he wants to tell us.

Nicodemus couldn't see past the limits of his boxed-in imagination. He struggled to lay aside long-held assumptions. He could not let go of customary ways of thinking and seeing and hearing, and so he was not able to open his eyes and his heart to see the wonder of what God was doing.

He couldn't get past the limits of his failed imagination, and this woman, this Samaritan woman, couldn't get past the limits of her ethnic identity.

It all started when Jesus sat down by a well, a well in the midst of the region of Samaria that had since Jacob's time provided a source of water. He was in the midst of a long walk from Judea to Galilee and he was tired, and when he saw a woman approach the well with her water jar, he asked her for a drink.

Was he setting her up? Did he recognize an opportunity for evangelism and attempt to engage her in conversation?

No! He was thirsty! Jesus was tired and Jesus was thirsty! He shared our common lot! He was tired and thirsty and when he saw her coming ... When he saw her coming, what did he see?

He saw a person who could serve him. He saw a person who could help him. If the story ended here, if there were no further report of Jesus' encounter with this woman, we would still have reason enough to recognize the Jesus who is full of grace and truth! Because when he saw her and saw that she had something of value to offer him and asked her to serve him, Jesus gave value to her!

How would you feel knowing that Jesus values what you have to offer him, knowing that he is eager to ask you for something he needs? How would you feel knowing that you matter to Jesus?

He saw someone who could give him the drink that he wanted, but what did she see? She saw ... a Jew! She didn't see a thirsty person to whom she could provide a drink. She saw a Jew.

He was a Jew and she was a Samaritan and she knew what that means. It means she knows him, knows he cannot, knows he will not, drink from a cup that she has touched, a cup that she has used.

She has nothing to see in him, nothing to hear from him, because she already knows everything she needs to know. He is a Jew. She knows who he is, and she knows who she is in his eyes -- an unclean, an irreligious, a despised Samaritan! He doesn't have to say anything, she already knows it, so she says it for him: "You surely cannot ask me for a drink because I surely don't matter and surely don't belong in your world!"

If only you knew what God gives and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would ask him, and he would give you life-giving water ...

It is a gentle, inviting, provocative response. Jesus doesn't directly challenge her assumptions, but takes the conversation in an entirely new and unexpected direction. He offers her a drink! Tacitly, without arguing her point, he completely ignores the wall she believes exists between them, and he offers her the best, the very best, he has to offer anyone -- life-giving water, water that gives ... eternal life!

Like Nicodemus, she seems to take Jesus too literally, wanting to know how he's going to get the water without a bucket and where he might go to find water with such wonderful benefits. But unlike Nicodemus, once Jesus assures her that he can indeed provide her with life-giving water, she has heard enough. "Sir, give me that water!"

When Jesus told Nicodemus, "Everyone must be born again," Nicodemus never said, "Tell me how! I want to be born again!" His only reply was, "How can this be?"

But she said, "Give me that water!"

The contrasts between these two stories are startling. Nicodemus comes looking for Jesus, wanting something from Jesus, even if he does not or cannot come right out and say it. But she just happens to bump into Jesus, and far from thinking she might actually want or need something from him, she knows he cannot possibly want to have anything to do with her.

He is a great teacher in Israel, a wise and good man, while she is a Samaritan, and a woman, and a woman of questionable character at that. She knows she has little to expect from Jesus because she is a Samaritan, because she is a woman, because she is a sinner.

There are so many differences between Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, but Jesus treated them both ... the same! He engaged them both in earnest conversation. He shared with them both his knowledge of the way that leads to eternal life. He revealed to them both what God had to offer them through him.

He treated them both the same, and that's the point! Or maybe treating them the same is not what I really want to say, because he saw each of them, the Pharisee and the Samaritan woman, as they were -- as unique human beings, as unique children of God, each with their own individual flaws and needs and desires -- and to each, he spoke the words they needed to hear. But he treated each of them with the same gentleness, the same honesty, the same respect, the same generosity.

And, for her, that was enough. Nicodemus' blindness was stubborn and hard to cure, but her blindness was cured in a moment! All it took was a little respect and a little affirmation. All it took was a little love.

Does that ring true to you?

Is it harder to cure the spiritual blindness of people who think they can see?

Is it harder to get people to accept a life-giving drink when they don't feel thirsty?

Is it easier to heal the wounds of a people who know they are sick and weak and know they are helpless, who know they cannot heal themselves?

Is it easier for people to see a new way and hear a new message who do not have a deeply invested interest in the old ways and the old message?

Is it easier to cure the blindness of Samaritan woman than the blindness of a Pharisee?

Is it easier to fill up the soul of a poor man than the soul of a rich man?

Is it easier for people who feel empty and lost to recognize Jesus than people who think they know the way already and think they can provide for themselves anything they might need or want?

It is easier. All it takes is a little love!

So what do I want you to take home with you from the gospel lesson that we have heard together today? Two things. One thing or another, depending on where you see yourself in this story.

You may see yourself in the Samaritan woman. You may have internalized the judgments of other people, believing what they say or believe about you, believing what society seems to say or believe about you. You may believe you matter less, for one reason or another -- because of who you are or where you

have come from, because of your race or gender or sexual orientation or class or ethnic background, because of what you do or what you don't do, because of what you have or what you don't have, because you believe you are perceived, because you have learned to perceive yourself, as less smart, less capable, less respected, less important.

If you do understand how it feels to be the Samaritan woman, may you know for sure that Jesus knows who you are and that Jesus honors you and affirms you and loves you. I pray that a little love will be enough to open your eyes, too, to all Jesus has to offer you!

Or maybe you see yourself in Jesus, or at least, as a person eager to follow in Jesus' footsteps. May you know, for sure, the difference a little love from you can make. A little respect, a little honesty, a little gentleness, a little generosity from you might just change another person's life. Because that's all it takes, just a little love, to open some eyes and to open some hearts.

God is everywhere, all around us, intertwined into all the times and places of our lives. But sometimes people don't notice him. Sometimes people don't recognize him. Sometimes people don't know him ... until they see him in us, until they recognize him through our love.