

Conversations with Jesus: Stalling God

John 4: 1-30, 39

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Trinity United Methodist Church

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I want to start the sermon today by asking a loaded question. Do you come to worship expecting to meet God? When you get ready to come on Saturday/Sunday, do you think, “Oh, yeah, tonight I am going to see Jesus! Tonight, I’m going to meet my maker! Oh, yeah!”?

We all have our routines, our ordinary way of going about our days. We usually make plans, and we usually expect them to happen more or less as we made them.

So today, I want to invite you to the well. She was going about her ordinary routine, too. Some people have said she goes to get water in the middle of the day because people had ostracized her, shunned her. That can’t be true, because in verse 28 and 39, her neighbors listen to her. Most likely, she is just a poor woman with no servant or child old enough to help her bring enough water home in the cool of the morning. She goes mid-day, in the heat, because it’s what she has to do.

She’s not looking for anything. Maybe she’s given up, you know? Five husbands and a live-in boyfriend, you might give up. Many people I’ve met who’ve been through multiple marriages are pretty lonely and not feeling particularly good about themselves. Jesus doesn’t condemn her, though, so we won’t either.

She’s not looking for transformation, not seeking change, and certainly not expecting to meet the Messiah. He must want to meet her, though. Look at verse 4. “He had to go through Samaria.” one sentence, full of meaning. Jews did not go through Samaria, even though it was on the the way to Galilee. They took the long way home, so to speak, through the Jordan valley. Samaritans were half –breeds. Jews didn’t even consider them part of the chosen people. The Samaritans only used the first 5 books of the Bible. They didn’t acknowledge the prophets who wrote during the Exile, because the Samaritans didn’t get Exiled. They were the riff raff who stayed behind when the best and the brightest were deported.

So they didn’t obey all the scriptures the Jews did. They avoided each other like the plague. Jesus had to go there because he had his reasons, not because it was required by travel.

Wells are, in the Old Testament, places of divine appointment. Jacob met Rachel by a well. Moses met Zipporah at a well. In fact, if you are a single guy looking for a mate, a well might be worth a try. People meet God beside wells.

Still, the woman had 5 ex-husbands and a live-in boyfriend. I imagine the last person she wanted to see was a man. There he is, tired and sweaty. A Jew.

She knows who he is. She can tell by the fringes on his *tallit*. Maybe she can even tell he's a rabbi. He shouldn't even be talking to her, but then, he asks her for water. The God of the universe puts himself at HER mercy, he requests of HER the very thing that is at the heart of the life he created.

She knows who he is, though. She's got his number, has him figured out. She points out that he shouldn't be talking to her. If she does give a Jewish man water, it will just make him unclean.

She thinks she knows who he is, but she is wrong. Look at verse 10. "If you only know who I was..."

We Christians do this a lot. We think we know Jesus. We are sure we understand his word to us. We have it all wrapped up in a nice, neat little package. We've taken Disciple 1,2,3 and sat in Steve Price's class. We've heard countless sermons. If someone asks, Do you know Jesus? We are sure to say, "absolutely." And then act as if we have something the outside world doesn't. We act like we've got him pegged.

I was talking with Phyllis Kauffman this week. Our conversation reminded me of something my Old Testament professor taught me. In his class, people were quite upset. They were arguing over whether the story of Adam and Eve and the talking snake was a literal, historical event, or whether it was an allegory, a parable. Each side was absolutely certain they were right.

He looked straight at us and said, "I don't think it matters whether it really happened or not. If you get caught up in that argument, you will have missed God's word to you. The point is, it always happens. We all hear the snake, and we all want what he seems to offer. We have all been in the Garden, and God is looking for all of us when we hide from him. It happens all the time." When he said that, the room got silent. We felt like kids whose parent had just skinned away all our arguments and got right to the heart of the truth.

One of the things we use to keep from really knowing Jesus is to forget he might have more to teach us.

Jesus proceeds to educate her. He tells her he has living water for her. Living water, flowing water, running water. Means the same. Water from a spring as opposed to water from a well. Water that is cold and pure as opposed to water that has been sitting in an underground cavern gathering heat from the rocky soil.

She misunderstands. In John, those who follow Jesus always do. We don't get Jesus. His words don't make sense (tell me you've never read the Bible and had that happen to you). He seems to be talking in circles. She thinks he's talking about water.

He's talking about life. New life. Changed life. He's talking about living so transparently and honestly, about simply trusting God and moving forward. He's talking about himself, the living water of the presence of God.

She still doesn't get it. verse 15. She doesn't understand what she's asking for, but he has something she wants and so she asks.

That's all it takes. He starts to teach, starts to open her up like a rose. He asks her to call her husband. It is an invitation to be honest, to be true. It is an invitation for her to reveal her deepest weakness and failure. He doesn't condemn her. He doesn't 'out' her. He continues to let her have the power. He does not point out a single sin.

It's like he knows her already. Verse 17.

Do any of you moms have 'mom radar?' Do any of you youth know what I'm talking about. I think Jesus must have something like 'mom radar.'

He reminds me of my friend, who has that sort of Mom thing that we celebrate on days like today. My friend has a son who is a freshman. He had a friend over one day, and they went upstairs to his room. No big deal, nothing new. But, she told me, her 'mom radar' went on high alert. She knew, just knew, they were up to something. It wasn't anything she heard them say. It wasn't how they looked when they headed up the stairs. She just knew. She was on the way up to check it out and met them on the landing. Her son had pierced his friend's ear with one of her earrings. She made him call his mom, who replied with her own intuition, "Your dad is going to kill you."

Jesus knows this woman like a mom knows her child. His knowledge is an invitation. She doesn't have to, but she begins to reveal her weakness. I have no husband. God knows the story behind that. God only knows what pain is involved in her utterance of that simple statement.

It's a strange thing. Even as she reveals her weakness and he affirms her honesty, something is happening. It's like he's been waiting for that, for that weakness to surface, for her willingness to be transparent. What he can do with one weakness?

Do you have a weakness? Or two? If you don't and you're married, ask your spouse. They can probably point out one or two. What Jesus can do with one weakness is astounding.

Sometimes your biggest weakness can become your biggest strength. Take, for example, the story of a 10-year-old boy who was born without a left arm. His parents, worried that he would lack confidence, took him to learn martial arts.

The boy began lessons with an old Japanese judo master. The boy was doing well, so he couldn't understand why, after three months of training the master had taught him only one move.

"Master," the boy finally said, "Shouldn't I be learning more moves?"

"This is the only move you know, but this is the only move you'll ever need to know," the master replied.

Not quite understanding, but believing in his teacher, the boy kept training.

Several months later, the master took the boy to his first tournament. Surprising himself, the boy easily won his first two matches. The third match proved to be more difficult, but after some time, his opponent became impatient and charged; the boy deftly used his one move to win the match. Still amazed by his success, the boy was now in the finals.

This time, his opponent was bigger, stronger, and more experienced. For a while, the boy appeared to be overmatched. Concerned that the boy might get hurt, the referee called a time-out. He was about to stop the match when the sensei intervened.

"No," the master insisted, "Let him continue."

Soon after the match resumed, his opponent made a critical mistake: he dropped his guard. Instantly, the boy used his move to pin him. The boy had won the match and the tournament. He was the champion.

On the way home, the boy and his master reviewed every move in each and every match. Then the boy summoned the courage to ask what was really on his mind.

"Master, how did I win the tournament with only one move?"

"You won for two reasons," the master answered. "First, you've almost mastered one of the most difficult throws in all of judo. And second, the only known defense for that move is for your opponent to grab your left arm."

The boy's biggest weakness had become his biggest strength.

Ok, so it's rarely that simple. She starts to test him, bringing up all the old Samaritan/Jewish conflicts. He invites her deeper. She stalls him with some theology. He responds to her questions. Interestingly, he doesn't seem to find it odd to be talking about religion with a Samaritan female. He lets her question, he lets her search. He's even letting her stall. After all, meeting him will change her life.

What I notice about Jesus is that he really wants her to know him. She keeps thinking she knows him – she tells him all she knows about worship, about God, about the Messiah. The Jews expected a warrior Messiah. The Samaritans expected a teacher Messiah.

Both groups thought they knew exactly what they were looking for.

Finally, he admits to her something he hasn't told anyone yet. Look at verse 26. After she has wondered aloud whether he is the Messiah, he answers, "I am he." In the Greek, it is literally, "I am." Do you recall the name for himself God gave to Moses, out in the desert by the burning bush? "I am." "I am."

The woman doesn't understand completely, but she loses no time in trusting him anyway. She leaves her jar there. Water is forgotten in the hurry to go and tell her neighbors and friends of the man she has met by the well.

The disciples return from their search for food and brush by her as if she's non-existent. They demonstrate in another conversation with Jesus that they don't understand him at all. And then the crowd comes, all the people return with the woman to hear Jesus speak. To let him take their ignorance and weakness and turn it to faith.

You see what's been happening, right? This whole time, during the entire story, Jesus was giving her, was giving all of them, the Living Water. They didn't know it, but he was already pouring his life out for them, like water on a thirsty land. He's already refreshing, renewing, reviving these people.

And all because an ordinary woman did an ordinary job, went about her ordinary day to get an ordinary drink of water. Water! Of all things. You drink it, right? 6-8 glasses a day! We bathe in it (I hope!) and use it to water our lawns. Such an ordinary thing, and yet so full of promise.

Every glass, every drop is an invitation. Remember the living water. Every sip, every dip is a call to prayer, to enter into the conversation with the Living Water who comes looking for us, who takes our weaknesses and turns them to strength, who does not condemn, but saves.