

## *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman.*

**J**esus had worn out his welcome in Jerusalem. He managed to get the religious authorities all riled up – it was probably his cleansing of the temple that did the trick – and he had to leave town in a hurry. Once out of the city, and beyond the easy reach of those whom he had stirred up, he could travel at a fairly leisurely pace, north to Galilee.

And at that time, there were two routes he could have taken. The most direct route was to travel straight north from Jerusalem, a path that would have taken him through the region of Samaria. The other route, which was longer than the first, went east out of Jerusalem, and then north, bypassing Samaria entirely. Now, the typical Jew in Jesus' day would probably have chosen the second route, because Jews and Samaritans despised each other and avoided contact at all costs. But John's gospel, in the verses that precede today's reading, tells us that Jesus "had to go through Samaria."

Why was that the case? Even though we know that Jesus was in a hurry to get out of Jerusalem, there is nothing in the text to suggest that he was in a hurry to get to Galilee. And all of this leads us to the conclusion that Jesus simply wanted to go through Samaria, and do what was virtually unthinkable to any sane first-century Jew: interact personally with the Samaritans.

As our gospel reading tells us, the first person that Jesus meets is someone whom the average Jew back then would consider a "three-time loser." This person was a "loser," first of all, because it was a woman. In those days, women were much, much lower on the social scale than men – "I thank you, Lord, that I was not born a woman." – and wives were generally held to be the property of their husbands. The second reason this person was a "loser" was because she was a Samaritan. The Jews hated and despised the Samaritans, and saw them as unclean and godless heathens. The third reason this person was a "loser" was because she was obviously an outcast from her neighbors; why else was she drawing water from the well at the hottest part of the day, rather than in the mornings, along with the other women of her city?

So, think about all this woman for a minute. If anyone ever had a reason to bemoan their situation, it was this woman. She is made to feel like a loser by half the population of Palestine, because she is a Samaritan, a condition over which she had no say. She is made to feel like a loser by half the population of Samaria, because she is a woman, another condition over which she had no say. And she is made to feel like a loser by most of the people in her own city, because her life is in a shambles – she's had five husbands who have either divorced her or died – yet another situation over which she had no control.

I find it interesting that, in John's gospel, it is to this three-time loser that Jesus, for the first time, admits plainly that he is the Messiah. In fact, I don't believe any of the gospels record a conversation that Jesus had with anyone that was longer, or more intimate, than that which he

had with this Samaritan woman. And even though it may seem odd to us that this is the case, it makes a certain amount of sense, because it would only be to such an outsider, and a loser, and a nobody, as that woman, that what Jesus has to offer would be received as good news. And so, in this remarkable exchange between two unlikely conversationalists, Jesus heals the Samaritan woman by the well, and affirms her value as a human being.

He affirms her as a Samaritan, by interacting with her, and by being willing to drink from her water bucket. He affirms her as a woman by speaking with her as an equal. And he affirms her as a person in her own rights, by offering to her a new relationship with God, and the hope of a new relationships with her neighbors. And Jesus accomplished these things by offering her a choice: well water, which can quench her thirst, or “living water,” which can quench her deeper and more significant needs:

*acceptance* as a human being;

*validation* as a person who has something to offer to others; and

*hope* that her future will somehow be better than her past.

And because we know the end of the story, we know which choice that Samaritan woman made. Fortunately, Jesus presents us with the same offer that he made to the Samaritan woman by the well. And he does so because Jesus knows that, for all of us, someone has tried to make us feel the way she felt. All of us, I’m certain, at one point or another in our lives, have been made to feel like outsiders, or like losers, or like nobodies. And just as Jesus gave the Samaritan woman a choice – well water or living water – he gives us that very same choice as well.

It should be noted, however, that our choice will have no affect on what has already transpired in our lives. Choosing the living water will not mean that God is going to make all of the bad stuff that has happened to us suddenly go away. Nor is it a promise that the rest of our lives will be free from pain. What it does mean, is that God is promising to help us transform all of the junk that people have dumped upon us, into the building blocks for a new life. Like that Samaritan woman, we too can become “wounded healers,” people who have come to terms with our past, and the evil inflicted upon us, and who have transcended any anger or grief that may have resulted from those experiences, and have allowed God’s living water to transform us into a source of hope and inspiration to those around us.

In his book, *Discovering Your Spiritual Gifts*, Dr. Kenneth C. Kinghorn, relates the wounds we have received in life to the spiritual gifts we are given. He writes:

“I believe that many - perhaps all - of our [spiritual] gifts may be understood in terms of our suffering. The relation is simple: If we did not have the specific set of wounds we have, we would not have the specific set of gifts we have. Our uniqueness as individual humans, while the produce of many influences, is intimately related to our wounds. We are

shaped and molded by them, made sensitive and toughened by them and by our responses to them through the years.”

Paul alludes to this in his letter to the Romans, when he wrote that we can “boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.” In other words, good can come from bad. “If suffering went out of life,” someone else once said, “courage, tenderness, pity, faith, patience and love in its divinity would go out of life, too.”

We can’t do a thing about the past, and there will be many things in our future that are beyond our control. But what we can control is our response to the events that take place around us. We can control how we will be shaped, and the decisions we will make. We can control whether we will be people of hope, or people of despair. We can control whether we will be people who are simply wounded by life, or people who allow their wounds to transform them into agents of God’s grace and hope. This is the difference between well water and living water. We are all thirsty for water, but which water we choose is entirely up to us.