

Sermons from Park Hill: February 24, 2008

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

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John 4: 5-42

**“Some of Us Are in There
Somewhere”**

“Last week, we had the cool dark of night, full of shadows and questions - and resistance...”¹
Under cover of night, Nicodemus came to see Jesus but couldn't understand the idea that he must be born from above to see the kingdom of God, to fully comprehend what God is up to. This respected man of learning came to see Jesus at night; the disrespected woman with a dark past met up with Jesus at noonday. Yes, last week, Nicodemus learned about what he couldn't see concerning himself, the truth at night. “This week, it's the bright noonday sun that tells the truth about who we are and where

we've been in our lives.” As my friend Kate Huey wrote on i.ucc.org, “Not just the beautiful, shining moments, but each little wrinkle and every large failure, our regrets, our wanderings, the losses we have known – the broken places in our hearts and lives. And we can't hide things so easily in the noonday sun.”

Imagine the setting: It's the hottest part of the day, when the sun beats down with its peak intensity. We're hungry and thirsty from traveling on foot on a dusty trail leading through the homeland of our people's mutual enemies. Jesus came upon a well, but he doesn't have anything to draw the water with. He's alone; the disciples are in town. Thirsty and with no way to drink - yet standing there right in front of a deep well.

Jesus sees a woman, and without hesitation, asks her for help. He is at her mercy - the only one around who can get him some water. Most people only saw her as the wrong kind - wrong sex, wrong religion... and with the wrong morals. You see, the only one who would be at the well when it's so hot is someone who is not welcome there when everybody else comes - in the cool morning.

As the disciple's reaction reminds us later, to have his need filled, he would have to commit a scandalous act – violating expectations, traditions about enemies, and laws about men and women in public. He had to rely on a scandalous woman. And she's so startled that

¹ Kate Huey, Reflection, i.ucc.org

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she forgets he needs a drink and asks why he dared talk to her - not so much that she is offended but shocked that he would make this request. She didn't know who this man was, but soon she learns – and proclaims – that he is the Messiah who is expected someday. According to John's story, to this stranger of the "wrong" religion and the "wrong" sex and the "wrong" past, Jesus reveals more truth about himself to her than he has told to anyone else before. And she gets it.

But Jesus didn't just stumble upon her. She was exactly the kind of person he wanted to share this news, this hope, with – to symbolize that it's the least-likely who receive a special blessing in the kingdom of God. She is exactly the kind of person who *personifies* the kingdom of God – and in clear contrast to Nicodemus, who couldn't understand it from his place of privilege and limited human view.

The last thing that happened before this daylight encounter was the nighttime conversation with Nicodemus - who you know was among the elite, the wealthy and powerful. Although he was a member of the establishment, with position and authority, we do have to give him credit for seeking Jesus out, even if in a dark room. Nicodemus searches Jesus out.

Jesus searches for someone just like this woman. Nicodemus wanted to understand, but he couldn't get it. He didn't; he couldn't understand the idea that the kingdom of God

would be so radically, upside-down-different; so different that he would have to be born over, from above, re-born, to grasp the fundamentally radical nature of the kingdom of God, not like anyone would have expected it to be – like her, not him. "But how?" he keeps asking, questioning. For him, it would be a matter of giving up something he thought he understood very well, that he had given his life to studying.

Frankly, the woman probably knew that this was her only hope. She too had questions, barriers to believing. But, having been through five marriages, she *did* know what it's like to have to start over, to try again – and again. And wouldn't she be open to a radically different way, where she wouldn't be cut out or left out or put out again? Who knows exactly what happened in her life. Yet I can't imagine hope was actually very real to her anymore. So, to start over, this humble woman must be raised up, to accept it, and in a sense, believe in herself as much as she would believe in him.

To start over, the Pharisee would have to give so much up. Though what he would receive in return would be much more fulfilling, riches of a different kind, yet hard it would be to give up everything you know – how it's "supposed" to be. That's actually true for her though, too. To give up every limitation she had been forced to accept, and make peace with. He would have to give up; but she needed to be lifted up. Because, in God's kingdom, both are equal. In Christ there is no more slave or free, there is no more male or female. There is no more Gentile,

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like the Samaritan woman, or Jew, like Nicodemus the Pharisee. All are one.

The kingdom of God is good news for both of them. But, as I said, first he had to give up the notions of his privilege and advantage; and she had to be lifted up from – and give up – her notions of disadvantage: that nothing good was ever going to happen to her, and that, in fact, nothing good is what she deserved. Perhaps tentatively at first, but she came to understand that the living water was really “God’s grace and acceptance of her, just as she was.”²

In the middle of today’s text, there’s a line that says, “You must worship God in spirit and in truth.” I’ve heard this line many times before; maybe you have too. But Eugene Peterson’s translation of this interaction in *The Message* made this passage come alive in a very different way for me; that makes the need of the woman, and our need, quite clear:

“The time is coming, ‘Jesus says,’ it has, in fact, come -- when what you’re called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter (in Jerusalem or on a mountain). It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people God is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before God in their worship. God is sheer being itself – Spirit. Those who worship God must do it out of their very

being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.”

In other words, in true worship, we can’t hide ourselves from God or each other – or even try to hide the truth from ourselves. To make this clear, the story takes it to the extreme – *five* husbands, abandoned by the other village women and obviously the families of all five men, living outside of marriage now, and fending for herself in the hottest sun. A clear outcast from both religious mandates and cultural norms.

Well, the good news is that we’re in there somewhere too. Maybe we can identify because we’re divorced, or widowed; maybe we’ve been abandoned by friends, or disowned by family, or left alone by our kids. Some of us are in there somewhere. **(In fact, reach over and tell your neighbor: some of us are in there somewhere).**

Maybe we get it because we’ve been pushed out as religious outlaws – skeptics, gay men, lesbians, transgendered, questioning... Some of us are in there somewhere.

Maybe we get it because we know loneliness and depression, or love someone who is an addict, who knows abuse, or we don’t dare to reveal to anyone about our family member who is in prison. Some of us are in there somewhere.

² Kate Huey, Reflection on i.ucc.org

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Maybe we understand her because we too are stuck in a place we don't want to be – a miserable job, a failing relationship, a frightening diagnosis for a disease, caring for someone who doesn't care about us. Some of us are in there somewhere. **(Reach over and tell your neighbor: some of us are in there somewhere).**

Maybe we get it because we can't bear to share the pain of our failures and disappointments to another person, let alone to a whole community of faith. Some of us are in there somewhere.

Perhaps we don't think there's a prayer in the world for us, even though we're here with *some* inkling of hope, yet beat down and on the brink of disappearing altogether. **(Reach over and tell your neighbor: some of us are in there somewhere).**

All of us are in there somewhere, in her story. And the kingdom of God is there for all of us too.

We all have something to give up – both privilege and disadvantage, private and public. I know we can all understand something of this woman's experience – not just with our heads but with our hearts opened just a little more each time we tell the truth about ourselves; when we share the burden we've been carrying alone, in silence, in shame, in grief – afraid of what might happen when we open ourselves to each other, to grace. It's hard to do when we want everyone to think we've got it all together.

It's hard to tell others our truth when we want everyone to think we've got it all together. Some of us are in there somewhere? *Understanding* that is good news.

But good news for us alone is not fully *the* good news. You know that. And she demonstrated that as the very next step in her transformation.

Yet, in our world, our nation, our state, our city - we remain divided: black from white, rich from poor, insured from uninsured, legal from illegal. Because our so-called born-again Christian politicians have more to gain by keeping us fighting over the limitations of our separate identities than finding our shared destiny,

- who are much more concerned about protecting their "hard-earned" wealth than losing any to unworthy illegal wannabees;
- much more interested in a hand-over of civic duty than a hand up for the defenseless of society;
- more gleeful in railing against a welfare mom who collected too much than a corporate CEO who stole too much;
- praising acts of personal charity while removing funds for public responsibility.

I don't get it. How can a nation led by Christians be so out of touch with the kind of kingdom-of-God Christianity that Jesus taught the woman at the well?

Do we only get water to live when we're dead? Is living water only a promise for the afterlife – so don't expect much now? But Jesus changes

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the woman's life right then and there. And she accepts it for herself. But then! She goes and changes the lives of the very people who had cast her out. This is even better good news! This, now, *is* the kingdom of God.

Once, no one wanted to be seen with her. Eyes followed her in disdain. The circumstances of her life were unacceptable. It seemed hopeless. Then this promise of water changed her life. But she knew *Living* water was also meant even for the very people who despised her. So she didn't keep it to herself. And neither should we. We let other people know they can trust us when we trust them with the truth of our lives.

"Give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." At first she meant it literally, that she would be spared the burden of carrying that heavy water jug back to town. What became clear, however, her truth, is that she would never be thirsty again – for things like the companionship of other women, conversation, and respect. Thirsty for, yet no longer frightened of, hope. She had lots of reasons to believe nothing good could happen to her, yet now, with this acceptance of Living Water, she was lifted up and born from above. She was free! And when she came back to that well, it was not as the woman who no one would talk to because of her past. It was as the woman who saved her people, who brought salvation to the Samaritans. She was the humble one lifted high. The night before, Nicodemus went home feeling empty.

She could have savored it all for herself. Why should she offer this to those people? She could have protected her wealth of information. But would she have really gotten the good news? By protecting our wealth, are we not letting it slip away? By shutting people out of our lives, are we not like the Pharisees, who just don't get it. Without other people, it wouldn't have meant anything. It doesn't mean anything outside of relationships.

We can all be loved - but is it love if it isn't shared? What is hope if not lived into the face of adversity? What is forgiveness if not used in the reality of our relationships? What is truth if kept in a closet of fear, away from anyone else who might understand or who might *need* understanding? Some of us are in there somewhere. What is Easter if we haven't gone through the wilderness of Lent? We're all in there somewhere – together.