

September 30 2012 - The Outcast

“Have you ever had one of those moments?” ...retelling some hilarious joke and you reach the climax or the punch line of the story you’re telling and you expect uproarious laughter but all you hear is dead silence and a few awkward chuckles. You expect to see people’s eyes popping out of their heads but all see are eyes that are glazed over. And so you reach into your mental cargo hold and you grab the only parachute that you have that might possibly rescue you from this social belly-flop and you say “Well, I guess you had to be there.” Have you ever had one of those experiences? Most of you probably have had. If you haven’t had one, you probably will and if nothing else, I’m pretty sure you’ve been on the awkward end of one of those moments. And I’m glad to see heads nodding otherwise I’d be having one of those moments right now. So good, we’re all on the same page.

I was thinking of that this week because I thought, you know if the Apostle John was here this morning and we asked him to read our text for the day, asked him to do the scripture reading, we’d say “Please read Chapter 4 from the Gospel according to you.” And he would say “what’s a chapter?” and we’d have to explain that to him a little bit. Then he would come up here and he would read the text or maybe he would just recite it from memory and recount the story for us. He would tell us this story that we find in John, Chapter 4 and then he would look at our faces and he would gauge our reactions and then say “Hm...guess you had to be there.” Because you see, to John, the story that we’re going to read in Chapter 4 is a mind-blowing; earth shaking; paradigm shattering event. To us, Jesus asked some lady for a drink of water and that’s what the story is to us. And in 2012 in Saskatoon, this story seems completely unremarkable to us. I mean basically, what happened. A guy asked someone for something to drink and in our world there’s a couple things that might happen in those situations. A guy asks someone for something to drink the first option is, sure go ahead, have a sip. The second option for those who are a little more germ conscious, they would say sure, go ahead just don’t put your lips on the bottle just kind of pour it so we don’t get the backwash and your germs. If the person was having kind of a bad day and someone came up and said “Can I have something to drink?” They might say “No, forget it. Go get your own bottle of water.

This one is mine.” But those are pretty much the options that we have in this story if it happened today and none of those is really front page news. We’re not going to see this on the front page of the Star Phoenix. You know, Extra! Extra! Read all about it woman gives man a glass of water. That’s not going to happen. We’re not going to run home and say: “Oh, I wonder if the news has any coverage of this event?” Or maybe, there was a bystander who popped out his iPhone when this happened so we can go to Youtube and look at this a woman giving a man a drink of water. That is noteworthy stuff. That is newsworthy stuff. That just isn’t going to happen for us. But if John says this is a really big story and if it is a big story and we don’t get it, we probably don’t get it because we weren’t there. We didn’t live in that time, in that place and in that culture. So before we can really understand the story, we need to put ourselves in the story. And that’s what I want us to try

and do this morning. At the end we're going to try and tie it all together and have some application for us to take home with. But more than anything this morning, I want you to recapture the wow-factor of this story. I want you to leave this text and walk away and say "That was one of the most incredible things I have ever heard about happening. And that's difficult for us to do because many of you have probably heard this story several, maybe dozens, I've tried to calculate if some of you might have even gone into the hundreds of times that you've heard or read this story. And so, this morning what we just want to do is recapture that sense, that sense that John had when he wrote this story, that this was something shocking to see and to hear and to read about.

Let's set the stage here this morning. Jesus has been down in Judea in the previous chapters of John. Down hanging out around Jerusalem. He is gaining some followers to him. He's gaining some popularity and some notoriety. And the Pharisees are starting to take notice of this Jesus guy and they are starting to realize that, you know what, he's somebody we should start keeping our eyes on. He has even come about this John the Baptist guy. And they start to realize that Jesus is starting to be a big deal he is even starting to get more followers than John the Baptist. We need to pay this guy some serious attention. And so, in response to that, Jesus decides that he is going to go back up North to Galilee and spend some time up there in his ministry. Now normally, when Jews would travel from Jerusalem to Galilee they would walk up the East side of the Jordan River all the way to Galilee. But Jesus decides on this occasion, that he is going to take a more direct route. Now, the little purple blob in the middle there (map) is called Samaria. Now, you may wonder why Jesus went through Samaria instead of taking the path that Jews would normally take along the Jordan River. Well, it could be that he realized the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Maybe he was in a hurry so he just took the straight line straight North to Galilee. Maybe he knew the woman we are going to meet in just a few minutes would be sitting at the well at that particular time and so he decided that he was going to be there to meet up with her. Or maybe he just went through Samaria just as an exercise for his disciples. To break through some of the stereotypes they may have had of those people at that time. Or maybe the reason Jesus decided to go through Samaria was because he knew no Pharisee would be caught dead following him through Samaria.

Well, let's talk a little bit about Samaria so that you have a sense as to where they are going and what the situation is. Way, way back in 722 B.C. the Assyrians came in and they conquered Israel. And the Assyrians practice of showing control over their Empire is, they would take people from a captured land and they would transplant them to a different captured land. And they would bring some people from that country and move them into this country, and they would move them all around and that was kind of the way they prevented people from uprising in their home country because they now weren't with their own country they were with this whole mish/mash of people. So that's what happened in Israel with the people.

A large number of the Israelites got transplanted to other places. A lot of them went to

places like Ninevah and there was a few that remained in the land of Israel. Now those who remained started to mingle and intermarry with all these other people who the Syrians dumped into the Country. And that group of people who resulted from that, is that group we call the Samaritans. Now, when the exiles eventually returned, it began what turned into a centuries long feud between the Israelites and the Samaritans. And by the 1st Century, the Jews considered the Gentiles to be dogs, and the Samaritans to be worse than the Gentiles. So you get kind of a feeling of where the relationship between these two groups of people was.

So you have several hundred years of bad blood and animosity between these two Nations. So much so, that the Jews would take the time and the energy and the effort to walk all the way around Samaria, rather than to take the shorter route and go through it. So, in John, Chapter 4, we see Jesus and he walks into Samaria. Right into the heart of Samaria and stops in a little town called Sychar at the foot of Mount Garrison. Now, if you went to this part of the World today you would find this medium sized town called Nablus and it's in the West Bank of that area of the World. I'll tell you a little bit about Nablus the modern City that's there. It has a population of approximately 150,000 people and it's predominantly Muslim now but during the Roman times there were as many as 1 million Samaritans who lived in this area. Now as of January 2012, there were exactly 751 Samaritans left and they all live in this little Town of Nablus. Now, religiously, they still use the same first five books of the Bible in the Old Testament, the same Torah the Jews use and they still consider Mount Garrison that you see in the picture in the background there that's still considered their holy place of worship. Now, Nablus sits on the same location as the ancient cities of Shekem and Sincar where our story takes place. That's an area of land that Jacob gave to Joseph way back in Genesis 33. And so this area of land holds several monuments, one of which is the Tomb of Joseph. If you remember the story from the Old Testament, Joseph ends up down in Egypt and he actually dies in Egypt. The last thing he says to his sons before he dies is, "When God takes you back to the Promised Land, take me with you." So we read in the story, when the Jews go back to the Promised Land they take Joseph with them. This is the area where they bury him.

But more important to our story, is that this area also has the Well of Jacob and that's the location where our story is going to take place this morning. Right now, it's located inside a Greek Orthodox Church, you see a picture of it there. Scholars are quite certain that the well that is in that Church is the same Well of Jacob that is in our story and the reason they're so sure is because there aren't any other ancient wells around. Not for miles, there's no other wells around. So they figure this must be the place where our story took place. So Jesus is going with his disciples, he stops into Samaria and he stops at this well which is outside the City. He sends his disciples into Town and says "You guys go and get some food" and he sits down and he waits. Now, this is shocking to John's readers. That Jesus would even be there is shocking to them. Jesus waits at the well and at about noon, the hottest part of the day, a woman comes to the well to draw some water. Now, this too is

shocking to John's readers because hauling water is hard work and so the women would come to do this in the cool of the morning or the cool of the evening, but never would you come to draw water in the heat of the day. Moreover, in 1st Century culture women were very restricted in the social opportunities and so many scholars say that this time of coming out together in the early morning, was actually something they might have looked forward to a little bit. Not because of the labour involved, but because this was their opportunity to chat freely and to visit and to spend time with each other and share their lives with each other. There were no men around so they could visit and socialize without any reservation at all. Which makes it all the more odd that this woman came to the well at noon. Not only was it the worst time of day to come to the well to do heavy labour out in the sun, but it also, by coming at noon she missed out on the best possible socializing time. So what could possibly prompt her to make this ill-timed visit. Well let's pick up the story in John, Chapter 4:7-9:

“When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her “Will you give me a drink?” His disciples had gone into Town to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman, how can you ask me for a drink?” For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.”

Jesus asked the woman for a drink. A seemingly innocuous thing to do, right? But this is shocking to John's readers, even shocking to the woman. She can't believe it herself. And there is a whole list of reasons why this conversation should never, never, have happened. Let me share with you just a few.

First of all, she is a Samaritan. Jesus and this woman should never have been in the same postal code with each other. Jews and Samaritans did not associate, if they could help it, at all, period. Which makes stories like the Good Samaritan all the more astounding when you read a story when the Samaritan turns out to be the 'good guy'. But John even includes a footnote in this story and says “for Jews do not associate with Samaritans.” And literally that phrase means “Jews do not use the same dishes as Samaritans”. Which gives great significance when Jesus is asking her for a cup of water to drink.

Secondly. He is a man and she is a woman. Now communication between men and women has its challenges. I read a story this week of a man who was reading through the paper one day and he came across a study that said “women use twice as many words as men do” and so excited to prove to his wife that he had been right for a long time, he accused her of talking too much and showed her the study. He read that men use about 15,000 words a day but women use 30,000 words a day. His wife thought for awhile and then she said to her husband “Well that's because we have to repeat everything we say.” And the husband said “What?” Communication between men and women has its problems sometimes but in the First

Century, the rules for interaction between men and women were quite different. Now I want to just give you a sampling so I can give you an sense of that. Now first I need to preface it. I am not endorsing some of these points of view and the Bible doesn't endorse some of these points of view but you need to get a feel of what was happening in the culture at that time. Here are some of the things that some of the Ancient Rabbi's have said about the interaction between men and women:

"It is forbidden to give a woman any greeting.

One should not talk to a woman to a woman on the street, even his own wife, because of the gossip of men."

This is probably my favourite. "He who prolongs a conversation with a woman brings evil upon himself, ceases from the words of the Law and at the last, inherits Hell."

Those were some of the teachings of the Rabbi's that were prevalent at that time. Basically, the bottom line was, men and women did not speak in public especially in any kind of religious connotation or on religious matters. One commentary said: "In this World, men rarely speak to women in public, even if they are married to them. Single men never speak, or touch a woman, at any time."

And when we are able to see in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament, this context for which the culture gives us, it shapes and forms our understanding for what's going on in these events and what's being said and what's being done, as it does in this story. The NIV Application Commentary says: "The surprising thing is not that Jesus should ask her for help with a drink, rather, that he would ask her for anything."

Third thing. They are at a well. Brad read for us earlier out of Genesis, the story of Abraham's servant looking for a wife for Isaac. And so he goes to a well and he waits and he says "whoever I ask for a drink and she gives it to me, then that's going to be the woman." Later in Genesis Jacob himself goes to a well and he's looking for a wife for himself and I like this story it's in Genesis 29. He goes to a well and there's a stone over top of the well. The shepherds are waiting and they say 'we have to wait until all the shepherds are here so that we can kind of work together and get the stone off the top of the well so that we can water our sheep.' And Jacob says "Okay". And then he sees his future bride coming towards him and she's beautiful and so he goes and lifts the rock off the well, by himself, so that she can have some water for her flocks.

There's another story in Exodus, Chapter 2. Moses has just run away from Egypt because he's wanted by the Egyptians and hated by the Israelites at that time and so he runs away to a foreign land and he finds himself at a well. At that well he happens to meet a group of ladies, one of which is Zaporah, who becomes his wife. So there's this dialogue in the

history of the Israelites where men and women at a well together....there are some echoes to that kind of situation, so when the disciples came back and saw Jesus standing at a well talking to a woman, they would have no doubt, been all kinds of shocked. When John's readers read this story, the idea of a single man chatting with an unmarried woman at a well would have been shocking to them, as well.

Again the NIV Application Commentary says "No self-respecting Rabbi in the 1st Century would have spoken to a woman in this particular setting."

Let's continue on with our story and see what happens next. John 4, starting in Verse 10:

"Jesus answered her "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water. "Sir" the woman said, you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep, where can you get this living water" "Are you greater than Jacob, who gave us this well and drank from it himself as also did his flocks and his herds?" Jesus answered "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again but whoever drinks the water I give him, will never thirst. Indeed the water I give him will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him "Sir, give me this water so I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

Now much like the story we read of Nicodemus a couple weeks ago, Jesus is using a physical image to explain a spiritual reality. With Nicodemus Jesus talked about being 'born again' and here in John, Chapter 4, Jesus is using this image of 'living water' and just like Nicodemus, the woman misunderstands what he is talking about. You see, living water is a common term that was used in that day. It was a common term for any kind of running water or a stream or anything like that, they would call 'living water'. So when we see this story and read about living water, we see the contrast between living water which is running and moving and well water which is just kind of sitting there. We see the idea that John is trying to show us over and over again, that Jesus is trying to provide us with an alternative way of live and not just an alternative but a superior way. But what the woman here is, 'this guy knows of some hidden spring, which would be awesome because then I won't have to come down here and draw water all the time.' But she must have been intrigued because everyone knew that there were no springs or no river anywhere in the area. In fact Jacob had to dig down 137 feet in this well, just to hit water. So the idea of a free flowing stream must have been very enticing to her.

Now, we've probably all made the same mistakes the woman did. We've all drunk from shallow wells while ignoring the living water that Christ has offered us. We've relied on things like money and power, on skill and beauty, on possessions and status, even on religious devotedness. All the while, Jesus is offering us true and eternal life welling up inside us, if we only put our hope in him. And it's not a new problem, the Prophet Jeremiah says in Chapter 2:12-13:

“The heavens are shocked at such a thing and shrink back in horror and dismay, says the Lord. For my people have done two evil things, they have abandoned Me, the fountain of living water and they have dug for themselves cracked cisterns that hold no water at all.”

I don't know about you, but I have in my life dug more than a few cracked cisterns that don't hold water.

But the woman hasn't figured out exactly what Jesus is talking and she doesn't know who Jesus is. And so Jesus directs the conversation to the next level. In Verse 16 he says:

“He told her “Go call your husband and come back” “I have no husband,” she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said quite true.” “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

“Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know, we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in Spirit and in truth.”

The woman said, “I know the Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

“Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you---I am he.”\

And now we understand why the woman came to the well at noon. She was an outcast. She was not permitted to come to the well with the proper women, or maybe the mid-day heat was easier to bear than their stares and their comments.

Now, John doesn't tell us why she had been married five times but in some ways it really doesn't matter. No matter what the reason was, the outcome was the same. She was an outcast. If five marriages would have ended in divorce then it would have been a disgrace to her. Back in those days, only a husband could call for divorce which means that she had been rejected and thrown out on the street five times. And after five times everyone must have been convinced that there was something wrong with her. She may even have been convinced of that herself. It is possible that she had been widowed five times. Although that would not carry the same guilt or blame, it still, no doubt, have it's own stigma. Everyone would believe that she must be either terribly unlucky, or maybe cursed, or perhaps she was being punished by God. Maybe she believed it too. Whether it was one or the

other, or a combination of both, she was an outcast. Unwanted, unloved and unacceptable. Which may be why she was living with man #6, you see, she would have no way to support herself or her kids if she had them. She had no choice but to take what she could get. To give herself to the only man who would take her and do so on her terms, as lousy as those terms might be. And in this desperate arrangement, it was likely just one more reason she was not permitted in polite social circles.

And all of this was just one more reason why a Jewish Rabi like Jesus, should not come anywhere near this woman. But Jesus was no ordinary Jewish and this was no ordinary Jewish Rabi. In fact, at the end of the conversation, Jesus reveals his true identity to this woman. This is the first time in the Gospel of John that Jesus claims to be the messiah and here of all places; to her of all people. I can't help but wonder what this woman must have thought at that moment. As the impression of who she was replaced by the reality of who he was, perhaps her thoughts were something like this. (video)

We all need this for our own. To be known. To be known not for our past or our mistakes or our baggage or our faults, but to be known for who we are in our heart of hearts. We all need this for our own to be loved, not for our accomplishments or our talents or our wealth, but to be loved because God has made us unique and valuable.

The story goes on in Verses 27-30:

“Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. No one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”

The woman left her water jar beside the well and ran back to the village, telling everyone “Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could he possibly be the Messiah?” So the people came streaming from the village to see him.”

The disciples returned and they are shocked by what they see. They want to ask “What are you doing?” But they don't. Their thinking “Is there anyone this guy won't sit down and talk to?” And the answer was “No”. And the woman runs back into town. She now searches out the people she was previously avoiding and Jesus has somehow turned the town harlot into the town herald. The first Christian missionary and by the end of the story she will have turned out to be the person who single handedly brings more people to Jesus than anyone else in the entire Gospel of John. And to John's readers, they would find that mind blowing and earth shaking and paradigm shattering.

So what do we take with us today? I guess it depends on who you are in this story. If you are the woman in this story, here's what you need to know. She tried her very best to put Jesus off and get rid of him. She said at the very beginning. “You're a Jew, I'm a Samaritan, we shouldn't even be having this conversation.” In the middle of the

conversation she asks “Are you greater than our father Jacob who gave us this well?” Really the question wasn’t the offending part, but any respecting Jew would be totally offended by the fact that she had called Jacob “Our Father”. That would have upset most people. She tried to sidetrack Jesus on some religious debate about whether they should worship on the mountain or in Jerusalem. When she’s speaking, she says “You people say we should worship in Jerusalem, but we say we should worship on the mountain.” Both the ‘you’ and the ‘we’ are emphatic as if she’s trying to taunt him with her words. As if she’s trying to goad him into saying “That’s it. This conversation isn’t worth it. I’m going to move on.” And despite trying to get rid of Jesus, he never left and even while she was talking to him she totally missed the point of what he was saying. He was talking about giving her new life and about spiritually renewing her from the inside out and she thought he was talking about some secret water fountain that would save her some time carrying her jar. But when the dust all settled he was still there. Waiting patiently; explaining repeatedly; loving freely; and accepting completely. And if you are the woman in that story, you may have tried some of those same things yourself. You may have tried to put Jesus off or to chase him away, or to do something for him to leave you alone. But he is always there waiting. You may have heard his message many times and totally missed the point of everything that was being said, but he is there still speaking to you. He is waiting patiently explaining diligently, loving freely and accepting you completely.

If you are one of the disciples, here’s what you need to know. No one was an outcast to Jesus. No one is unworthy of his attention. No one is incapable of redemption. No one is too far gone too far out or too far away to be reached by his love. And if that is true of Christ then it should be true of all of his followers, as well. Which means we may need to go to some unpopular places. We may have to reach out to some unfamiliar people. We may have to initiate some uncomfortable conversations but do it with the same love and grace that Jesus did. Whoever you are and wherever you are this morning, I pray that you like this woman, would leave your empty jar at the well and allow living water of his Spirit to fill your heart and your life from today on.