

“Changed Lives”

Date: March 15, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: John 4:5-42

Occasion: Lent 3, Year A

Themes: Grace, acceptance, conversion

There are many stories in the Bible of people who met Jesus and their lives were changed. Such is the story of the woman at the well. When first they meet, the woman is shocked that Jesus would even speak to her. “*You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman,*” she says. “How can you ask me for a drink?”

There was such a bitter prejudice between the Hebrews of the north country living in Samaria and the Jews of the southern country, who worshiped in Jerusalem. Jews hated Samaritans, considered them half-breeds, having married foreigners who weren’t pure Jews. They worshiped in the wrong place; they adopted some of the religious practices of the people they married; they were racially inferior.

Jews wouldn’t even talk to a Samaritan. But Jesus did.

In addition to the rules about Jews and Samaritans not talking to each other, there were also rules about men and women conversing in public. If she wasn’t your wife, daughter or mother then men weren’t supposed to talk to women in public. It was scandalous. But Jesus did.

It was not so much that Jesus enjoyed breaking the rules, as it was his love *compelled* him to talk to the people who needed Him. Jesus didn’t let the usual social barriers get in the way of engaging people who needed God’s love. How quick we are today to prejudge people and then decide whether or not we’re going to relate to them.

It’s an *us* against *them* mentality. If they’re not in our group, then we don’t want to associate with them. You know it goes: black and white,

Anglo and Latino, gay and straight, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican. We put people into groups, and then decide if they can be our friends or not. Not so with Jesus. He loved all people, and calls us to do the same. Love, you see, has the power to transform people.

The second amazing thing about this story is what Jesus knew about her. Having never met her, revealing his divine wisdom, Jesus told her to go get her husband, knowing full well they weren't married. He also knew this wasn't her first husband; she had been married five times before.

We don't know *why* she had been married five times before; the Bible doesn't tell us. We automatically jump to the conclusion she was an immoral woman and was bed-hopping. But it could have been that each of her previous husbands had died. Imagine the burden of grief she carried with her if that were true.

The fact that she was able to remarry multiple many times tells us there was something special about her – her looks, her personality, her strong character. Something made her a catch. We have simply assumed it was her bedroom habits that made her so special. The Bible simply tells us she had been married five times before and this man was not her husband.

Perhaps she *was* a woman of ill reputation, but we don't know that for certain. In any case, Jesus treats her with respect, AND he knows all about her. He treats her with dignity, whether she was a bed-hopper, or a woman who had bad luck in choosing the right men, or she was a widow multiple times over. He knows there is something in her soul that is hurting.

And he offers her grace. That's what this story tells us about Jesus. He didn't come to judge people; he came to heal them with love. He came for those whose lives were filled with grief, or with shame.

He came for all of us. Jesus came for the ones who are addicted to alcohol or sex or gambling or drugs. He came for the poor, as well as for rich. He came for those who are hurting. He came for the damaged ones, the unlovable ones, the selfish ones and the trouble-makers. He also came for the good ones, who are always doubting whether they are good enough.

That's the gospel, dear friends; that's the good news. God's grace is available to all – to the immoral and the amoral; to the Jew and to the Palestinian; to the native-born and to the illegal; to the gay and the straight; to the black and brown and white.

Jesus came to set us all free – free from the things that keep us from the abundant life which Jesus offers. Jesus came, knowing our story – you know- the story about yourself you don't want anyone else to know about – because He loves you, and he wants to bring you His peace.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, flowing from the cross of Calvary is the Living Water that will quench our spiritual thirst. O brothers and sisters, I don't know what gets you tied up in knots inside your soul, but I know the One who can undo that knot and give you peace.

His name is Jesus. Drink from the well of His grace and be satisfied. His love and mercy are from everlasting to everlasting. His is the well that will never go dry. Drink, taste his grace, and see for yourself. The woman at the well drank of His love and she was changed forever.

She ran back to her village to share with her neighbors the good news. "I have met the Messiah. He told me everything I have ever done." They came, and they believed, and that village was never the same again. A Samaritan woman with a questionable background receives grace and is transformed. And now she is a messenger of that same grace, guiding others to the Master. Grace – God's undeserved, unconditional love.

They have just shared soup together at the soup kitchen, and they now come to the time at the mission when they share the bread and cup at the altar in the chapel. That day, Pastor Tom had an unforgettable experience at the communion service.

As he was moving down the altar rail serving communion, he came to a man kneeling there who looked like he had been out on the streets for a really long time. The man looked up at Pastor Tom and whispered, "Skip me." "What? Pardon me?" Tom asked.

In a louder voice the man said again, "Skip me." "Why?" asked Tom. "Because," the man said, "I'm not worthy." Tom said, "Neither am I." Then, Tom added, "I'll tell you what. I'm going to serve communion to these other people. Then, I'm going to come back and serve communion to you, and then, I'd like you to serve it to me."

"Father, is that legal?" "Yes, it's legal; it's beautiful and that's what we're going to do!" Tom answered. Tom went down the altar and served all the other people kneeling there and then he came back to the reluctant man and said, "What's your name?" And the man said, "Josh." Tom held out the communion elements to him and said,

"Josh, here is the Body of Christ and here is the Blood of Christ given for you. Eat this and drink this in remembrance that Christ came for you and Christ died for you. Amen."

Josh blinked back the tears in his eyes...and he received Holy Communion. Then, Pastor Tom knelt and handed Josh the trays of bread and juice and said, "Now, you serve me." Josh nervously took the trays and again he said, "Father, are you sure this is legal?" "Yes, it's legal. Just do it."

Josh's eyes were darting from side to side, as if looking over this shoulder and then the other, as if he expected the police or the FBI or the pope to come rushing in and arrest him. Finally, he held the trays towards Pastor Tom and as Tom received the sacrament Josh muttered:

“Body – Blood – for you. Hang in there!”

Tom said later, “Of all the communion services I have ever been a part of, I don't ever recall the words, “Hang in there,” in any of them. But at that moment, for me, communion had never been more holy.”

And Josh walked out of the shelter that day, with an extra “spring in his step,” and it was reported that he went everywhere saying, “You won't believe what I did today.” In fact, the story became so widespread that from that day on, Josh became known on the streets as “The Rev.”

What a remarkable story this is...the story of grace, love, acceptance, forgiveness, reconciliation, bridge-building and Holy Communion. That's what Jesus does – He changes lives. That's what this amazing grace is all about – God's undeserved, unconditional love. Grace is the power of God to change lives.

How did the Church misunderstand the gospel so completely? How did we become so judgmental toward others, trying to decide who gets in and who doesn't enter the Kingdom of God? How did we allow ourselves to shut out those whom we disapproved, when time and time again Jesus did exactly the opposite? God's grace is available to all.

Ask the woman at the well. Ask Josh, the homeless guy known as The Rev. God's amazing grace changed them. That amazing grace has changed me. Has Jesus changed you?

Let us pray: