

"More than a Quick Fix"

John 4: 5-42

I read a story awhile back. It was in one of those clergy reflections journals. We clergy read those when were bored, or really desperate for a sermon illustration. It had been contributed by a new priest. She was on her first cure, and was telling of an encounter she had had with a motorist whose car was stalled at an intersection.

The hood was up, and the motorist, also a woman, had flagged her down for help. "I can't get it started," the woman said, "but if you jiggle the wire on the battery, I think it will work." The priest grabbed the positive battery cable, but it came off in her hand. Having been raised in a family of car buffs, she knew her way around an engine, and immediately knew exactly what was really needed. "This cable needs to be tightened up," she told the motorist. "I can fix it if you have a wrench." "Oh, my husband says to just jiggle the wire. It always works. Why don't you just try that?" The priest paused for a moment, wondering why not just keep things simple and simply do that. Finally, though, she said, "Look, if I jiggle the wire, you're going to need someone else to do it every time you shut the engine off. If you'll just give me two minutes and a wrench, we can solve the problem for good and you can forget about it." Reluctantly, the woman fumbled under the front seat and then extended a crescent wrench through the window of the car. As the Priest tightened the battery cable, she began to reflect, as priests are want to do at odd moments, how many times she had tried, in her own life, to get a "quick fix" from God. "I have this problem, Lord, and if you'll just jiggle the wire, things will be OK. I'm in a hurry, so let's just get me going again the quickest way possible."

How often do our conversations with God resemble that quick fix approach? "Lord, I'm feeling kind of down. I'm in a hurry and I don't have time to discuss why, so would you just pick up my spirits for the

day." "Lord, I'm stuck at home right now, and feeling detached and afraid. But I've got too much to do to talk right now, so could you make things work out for me?" "Lord, my grades are suffering. I'm joining an on-line chat with my friends right now, but do you think you could help me catch up tomorrow?" God sometimes grants requests like that, just to help us along. But God's desire is to take the time to deal with our root problems and fix them. To get at those requires an openness to God, and a willingness to be honest about them.

Our lesson from The Gospel According to John, this morning, introduces us to another person who needed more than a quick fix. She has come to be known to us as the woman at the well. The setting is a village well. Like the post office in a tiny town, or the coffee shop in other places, the ancient village well was the place where people gathered every day to get and share the news and gossip. People would linger as long as necessary to catch up on the latest happenings. There were times when visiting preachers would address the people at the well. The well was the center of activity in the ancient world.

This particular well was known as Jacob's Well. It held a special place for the people; it was the ground that Jacob, at his death, had given to his son, Joseph. Both Samaritans and Jews held special memories of this place. It was located at a major crossroads, making it an ideal stop for travelers as well as a perfect spot for social gatherings.

Jesus and his disciples have stopped now at this very spot. The Disciples go to look for food while he rests. It's midday and hot. Having been there, we're talking around 100° plus. No one else is at the well as Jesus sits down. Then, this woman approaches. Right away we have we are given a clue that something is not quite right. Village women would gather water from the well early in the morning before the heat of the day. Or they would wait for the cool of the evening, after the sun had set. But she has come at the hottest time of the day. Clearly, she is an

outcast, and feels better off coming here while no one else is around. Expecting to find no one at the well she is very surprised to find Jesus resting there. She is then shocked when he speaks to her. In Jesus' day men were not permitted to speak with women in public. A man could speak with his wife, of course, but even that was to be brief, and only if necessary. As a rabbi Jesus' behavior would be seen as particularly scandalous: first, because she was a woman; worse yet, she was a stranger to Jesus; even worse, she was a strange Samaritan woman; worst of all, she was a strange Samaritan woman of doubtful virtue.

But Jesus is tired from traveling. He is weary, hungry, and in need of rest. We like to think of Jesus as always on the go, somebody who never got tired; teaching and preaching, always healing the sick and feeding the hungry; but not this day. Yet, as this woman comes to draw water, Jesus senses something is wrong in her life. Speaking out of the depths of his concern for her he begins a process in her that will lead to much more than a quick fix. He offers her "living water." In this way, Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well has something to tell you and me about what a truly healing encounter with Jesus can do.

And the first something is this: In a healing encounter with Jesus we come to see ourselves in a new light. The longest recorded conversation of Jesus with any person is this one with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus asks her for a drink. The woman is shocked. Besides the violation of social norms here, it was also common knowledge that Jews did not share cups or bowls with Samaritans. The woman questions Jesus. Jesus then speaks of "living water."

As Mary pointed out last week, it is often the case in John's gospel account that there is some level of misunderstanding in Jesus' conversations with others. Jesus is talking about new life, eternal life, and this woman thinks in concrete terms. But, at the mention of "living water," she perks up. There was an ancient legend about Jacob drawing

water from this well and the water bubbled up, hence living water. That's why she asks Jesus, "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well?"

This Samaritan woman, like Nicodemus last week, begins to banter with Jesus, using Jesus' metaphor. She asks Jesus for some "living water," so that, in her own words, "I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." In her way of thinking she would never have to face the humiliation or scorn from the other women because she would no longer have to go to the well. She would have this "living water," and she could experience some peace in her troubled life. She wants a quick fix for her problems. But Jesus starts the search for the lasting solution. He tells her to go get her husband and come back. Still desiring to get off easy she says she has no husband. Jesus then confronts her with the truth of her life. Astounded, she responds, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet."

Jesus is seeking to have her face the real reason for her problems in life. She still does not want to deal with that, so she changes the subject. She begins arguing theology. Jews and Samaritans worship in different places, she points out. But Jesus will not let her dodge the process. He brings her back by telling her that it's not the place of worship, but the manner and inner attitude of worship that matters. True worship is "...in spirit and truth..." Now we glimpse this woman's faith. She confesses, "I know the Messiah is coming." Jesus replies, "I am he."

Jesus confronts the woman at the well so that she can see herself in a new way. Because of this conversation, she is changing already. She leaves her water jar and heads into town to tell other people that she has found the messiah. Jesus wants us to see ourselves in a new light. For when we face ourselves, we can be changed. We too can receive living water; a healing for life. That's the first something this encounter tells us this morning.

Here's the other: After Jesus encounters us and leads us to the truth, he directs us to tell others what we have found in him. That's exactly what the Samaritan woman does. "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!", she tells the townspeople. She is now an apostle to her own people. The most telling part of this story is that the townspeople believe her. The change inside her is already showing on the outside. They follow her back to the well to meet Jesus.

This is authentic evangelism; caring about others enough to want them to experience the life you and I know in Jesus. Note: she doesn't lose the message in answering everyone's questions; the answers to which she may not know. She even asks deflecting questions herself, "He couldn't be the Messiah, could he?" She only shares what she does know; she has met Jesus and he has made a difference in her life. The woman who shied away from people because she wanted to avoid their scorn, want to share with them, the very people who had hurt her, that she has found the Messiah.

The townspeople discovered Jesus that day only because of the unlikely witness of this woman. They want to see Jesus for themselves. They meet him, and they believe only because the woman at the well has been pulled by Jesus out of herself and her personal fears. John adds, "They asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word." The townspeople now say to the woman who is responsible for bringing them to Jesus, "It is no longer just because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that he is truly the Savior of the world."

Jesus had done more than apply a quick fix in this woman's life. He had shown her herself and given her living water. How about you? God wants to do more than just a quick fix for you and me too. He desires for us to have life, brimming full and overflowing. Open everything to Jesus. DRINK, thirsty one, and live!