

A PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

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John 4:1-29

When we open the pages of the New Testament, we are immediately confronted with the thrilling story of how Jesus dealt with people. One of the most surprising aspects of this story is our discovery of the kinds of people with whom Jesus chose to deal.

They were a strange lot. Most of them were commoners. Some of them were social outcasts. All of them were needy. Yet Jesus never once showed the slightest sign of disillusionment or disappointment in the material with which He had to work. In fact, the opposite was true. He seemed to delight in taking the most unlikely candidates and printing them into creatures of character and influence.

For instance, he took a discredited, socially unpopular tax collector, and made him Matthew, the writer of the first gospel. He took a talented, but cynical skeptic, and made him into a preacher of living faith whose name was Paul. He took a blustery, cowardly fellow who allowed the taunts of a young maiden to so shake him up he actually cursed his Lord. He took that weak-kneed, vacillating fisherman and made him Peter. The rock. The solid one. The mighty voice of Pentecost.

The Kinship Between Us and this Woman--Part 1

Many Things In Common

In this story, which is my text, we watch as he takes a fallen woman from the streets of Sychar and skillfully remolds her life so that this mistress of many men becomes the first home missionary of the Christian church. There are many reasons why I have chosen this particular text this morning. Not the least of these is the fact that there is far more kinship between us and this woman than many of us care to admit.

You see, even though this pathetic creature was a social outcast, a moral misfit, walking proof of the tragedy of sin; even though she bore on her body the marks of a faded glamour and a jaded passion, this woman, like nearly all of us, had a definite religious background.

Her Religious Background

This is revealed by the fact that (Verse 12) she refers to

AOur Father Jacob, who gave us this well.®

She was speaking of a Samaritan woman. The Samaritans were members of the northern kingdom of Israel. It was their claim that Jacob was one of their patriarchs, because the land upon which they lived was land Jacob had given to Joseph as an inheritance. The Samaritans asserted that, in turn, Joseph had given it to them. So when she spoke of Aour Father Jacob®, she revealed what we might call her religious background.

Her Early Training

Furthermore, she had never completely gotten away from the influence of her early training. Later, in her conversation with Jesus (Verse 25), she makes reference to the coming Messiah of the world. So you see, whatever else she might have been, this woman was not unenlightened. She had a definite religious background and she was true to her early training.

The Difference Between Believing and Living

Now I'm not suggesting she was a religious person. In fact, all the evidence shows that she lived a long way from the moral and social ideals of her childhood faith. And, in that sense, there is far more kinship between us and this woman than many of us care to admit.

There are a good many people in the city of Chicago and the Morgan Park Baptist Church who lay claim to some religious background. They would be the very first to recoil at the inference that they are pagans. They would be quick to tell of their childhood training and might even boast of some vague religious hope for the future. But that's about the end of it. There's a disturbing conflict between what they say and what they do. Whatever religion they claim to

possess has no apparent relationship to life as they live it. So the first reason I=ve selected this text this morning is because there is more kinship between us and this woman than many of us would care to admit.

The Kinship Between Us and this Woman - Part 2

Immense Lessons To Be Learned

The second reason I ask you to look at this particular incident is because of the immense lessons which are to be learned from even a sketchy study of what Jesus said to this woman and what she, in turn, said to Him.

Someone has called this story Aa gospel within the gospel. It is a story of the growth of a soul. It is a picture of a pilgrim=s search for God. And traced here, in simple lines, are the steps of that pilgrim=s progress.@

It=s interesting to note that each time this woman speaks to Jesus, she calls Him by a different name. As the conversation moves along, she is lead, step-by-step, into an ever-broadening understanding of the glory and power of the person with whom she=s talking.

To be sure, it=s the story of a particular pilgrim=s progress. But more than that, it is the ageless story of every pilgrim=s progress. It is living proof that AYou shall seek (God), and find (God) when you search for (Him) with all your heart@ (Jer.29:13).

Jew

Notice first of all that the woman begins her quest with an attitude of skepticism. Her initial word for Jesus is one which reveals a certain measure of contempt, for she says (Verse 9), AHow is it that Thou...a Jew...@ You can almost see the sneering curl on her lip and hear the searing scorn in her voice, for there was certainly no love-lost between the Samaritans and the Jews. To the Jews, the Samaritans were half-breeds and they looked down on them as if they were the lowliest of the low. If the occasion permitted it, a Jew would spit in the face of a Samaritan.

Would mock him. Taunt him. Even persecute him. Consequently, the Samaritans had nothing in their hearts but resentment, hatred and bitterness toward the Jews. As always, prejudice is a two-way street. And thus, with withering scorn, the woman lashes out at Jesus: AHow is it that thou...a Jew...@.

Sir

Almost immediately, the love of God breaks through the human barriers of bitterness and hatred. Jesus refuses to take the bait. Instead of striking back with cutting words of anger and contempt, the very tenderness of Jesus arouses the woman to curiosity. There is something about Him that is different! And we notice (verse 11) that when she speaks to Him a second time she calls Him: ASir.@

Already her heart has begun to melt. And this is inevitable. One can not be long in the presence of the simple holiness of Jesus without finding their initial contempt changing into curiosity. That=s the story of every Pilgrim=s progress. It begins with skepticism but, in the face of the attractiveness of Jesus, it soon turns to seeking.

Such is the case of the Samaritan woman. Dr. R. Calkins, to whom I=m indebted for the idea and outline for this sermon, says in his book How Jesus Dealt With Men:

AThere was something about His bearing and the way He carried Himself which made her feel she had been unfair. It was not right to call Him a Jew. He was not revengeful or angry because of this sneer. He didn=t try to square the count by tossing off some discourteous comment about her Samaritan background. There was no resentment in His speech.@

In fact, the very opposite is true. There is about Him a purity, a grace and kindness so utterly unlike the hard, cynical, cruel men with whom she usually consorted.

Realizing she has been unfair, she turns back, and when she speaks to Him a second time it is

with respect. She acknowledges that at least He is a gentleman, and she calls Him: ASir.@"

Prophet

But that=s not the end of her enlightenment. As they talk on, Jesus begins to tell her everything she ever did. Suddenly she says, verse 19, AI perceive that you are a Prophet.@" With infinite tenderness, Jesus had put His finger on the sorest spot in her life with the simple sentence:

A(Woman), go call thy husband@ (Verse 16).

Now remember, they are alone. Whenever Jesus dealt with the intimate tragedies of a broken life, He always did it in private. There was none of the spectacular in His manner of dealing with sinners. He was never guilty of exploiting their weakness for personal fame or profit. He never put a self-righteous tongue in His cheek and, in the name of science, produced a book on AThe Sex Habits of Samaritan Women.@"

Whenever Jesus had to deal with one whose heart was broken, He did it as one whose heart was breaking! In this particular case before us this morning, He is able to look beyond the hard exterior of this woman whose body has been a pawn in the hands of lustful men, and He sees the deep, scorching, burning restlessness of one whose soul is thirsty for some lasting satisfaction.

Knowing there will never be peace of mind as long as there is hidden, unconfessed sin in her life, with infinite tenderness, Jesus goes directly to the core of her problem: AGo, call thy husband.@"

It is then, as the whole sordid story comes tumbling from her lips, that she suddenly awakens to the fact that she is in the presence of one who is more than an ordinary gentleman. She calls Him AProphet@" meaning, Aa man with an understanding heart.@"

Christ the Savior

It is then that Jesus is able to lead her into a final unfolding of Himself. Up until now, she has not fully understood. She has only taken in the surface meaning of His words. But now, as she

listens intently to Him speak, the chords of memory are touched and she recalls the training of her childhood. Truly, this man speaks as one with authority. He talks as the Messiah will talk when He comes. And slowly, with hopeful seriousness, she says, verse 25,

AI know that Messiah cometh, which is called Christ: when He is
come, He will tell us all things.@

And then, with startling simplicity, Jesus answers, verse 26, AI that speak unto thee am He.@

For a moment she stands silent. Staring down into the deep waters of the well. Stunned by the swiftness of it all. Beautifully bewildered by the revelation that she has been standing in the presence of the ChristCthe MessiahCthe promised Savior who had been her childhood hope.

And then, as the light breaks in upon her darkness and dawn is born in her seeing soul, she rushes off, completely oblivious to the scorching sun. Her original mission is forgotten as her water jars are left behind. All of the sorrow and pain of her sordid past is forgiven and gloriously erased from her memory. Away she hurries to the village, shouting as she goes to everyone she meets, verse 25, ACome, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: Is not this the Christ?@

Later, Verse 42, those who have been touched by her testimony add the insight:

ANow...we know that this is...the Savior of the world.@

Do you see the unfolding? First, a Jew. Then a gentleman. Then a Prophet. And finally, Christ, the Savior. That=s the story of a pilgrim=s progress. It begins with contempt and ends with communion. At first there is nothing but scorn and skepticism but, in the end, there is surety and salvation. From a foe to friend. Such is the glorious unfolding. Christ begins as a figure in time and becomes, at last, a Savior for all eternity.

Contemporary Attitudes Towards Jesus

It=s no different today. There are four basic attitudes which people take toward Jesus of Nazareth.

1. Scorn and Skepticism

There are those who have nothing in their heart but contempt for Christ. They view Him with

scorn and skepticism. To them, He is just another Jew. They cannot see that He has made any contribution to history. As a matter of fact, they rather look upon His coming into the world as something of a catastrophe. His life and death resulted in upsetting the status quo. The new religion which sprang up in His wake brought division among friends and demands for social justice. All of that upset the quiet, easy-going world of His time.

This attitude of skepticism is reflected in a recent poll conducted by Grossest and Dunlap, the International of a new history book. They asked a panel of 28 historians, educators and journalists to rate the 100 most important events in history.

First place went to the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. In second place was the development of modern methods of printing. Eleven events tied for third place and, in fourth place, along with the setting up of the United States Constitution, the use of ether in making surgery painless, and the beginning of flight by the Wright brothers, was the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In other words, the best that Jesus could do, in the judgement of 28 modern historians, educators and journalists was a tie for fourth place!

Of course, *some* people rate Him even lower than that! They act Aas though Jesus never lived, as though He never died.@ That is the attitude of modern skepticism. Jesus was just another Jew. A Galilean carpenter who had grandiose ideas about His own importance and, to maintain peace, He had to be put to death by His Roman rulers.

2. Respect

A second attitude held by some today is one of condescending respect. They look upon Jesus as a great man. A glowing example of the way a fellow ought to live. In fact, some of them would go so far as to say He was probably the greatest man who ever lived. The supreme example toward all of us should strive. The model man, if you will.

Undoubtedly, these people would be shocked at the thought of putting Jesus in a fourth place tie with the Wright brothers and the discovery of ether. They hold Him in high esteem. They are humanists and their interest in Christ is one of mild adulation because of His high ethical

standards and His revelation of so magnificent a morality.

But beyond the point of condescending respect, they find it difficult to go. They *are* a step further on in the Pilgrim=s progress than the first group. At least they recognize Jesus to be a gentleman, and they call him: ASir.@"

3. Teacher

The third attitude characteristic of a broadening understanding of who Jesus really is, is that of George Bernard Shaw. In one of his recent writings, he said:

I am no more a Christian than Pontius Pilot, but in Jesus of Nazareth lies the way of life for the future.@"

Here is the concept of Christ as teacher, philosopher, interpreter of truth. It is held by those who have been moved from contempt to curiosity. They have become skeptical of their skepticism and have begun to doubt their doubts. They have come face-to-face with this human genius and have seen in Him something more than a Jewish gentleman. They have been captivated by His teachings which are profoundly simple and simply profound. They have been enamored by His attractiveness and the splendor of His example and they want to know why?

They=are interested in the secret of His radiance. They are curious about the source of His power over people. Theirs is an intellectual fascination, and through it they are led from mere respect to a place of reverence. They call Him: AProphet@.

Savior

There=s hope for this latter group for they=are not far from the Kingdom. If they continue in their seeking they, like the woman in Samara, will come to acknowledge Him as Christ, the Savior. And that, of course, is the moment for which Jesus is waiting. He is waiting for that day when the plodding pilgrim will bring the alabaster box of humble worship and, kneeling down, will cry out with the prophet of old:

AMy Lord and my God.@"

It is only then that the thirsty soul shall be able to drink freely of the water of life. It is only then that a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment can sweep into seeking hearts. For, until we move on in our pilgrim=s progress to the point of acknowledging Jesus to be the Christ, the Savior, the Promised One of Hope, we shall never be at peace.

I don=t know where you stand in your relationship to Him this morning. Perhaps you have drunk deeply of the waters of skepticism. If so, as you have already discovered, there is no satisfaction there. Polluted by a spirit of contempt and scorn, those waters will only give you canker sores of bitterness, and you will thirst again.

It may be that you have drunk deeply of the waters of humanism. For a time you may have been enamored by the ethics of what you might call the modern man. But after you have tried, without success, to live by His standards and observe His ideals, you will find the frustration of failure welling up within you, and you will thirst again.

It may be that you have taken up the cup of learning and, pressing it to your lips, have drunk deeply of the waters of intellectual fascination with Jesus. But, if you do not press on from there, and also discover the teacher as well as His teachings, you will thirst again.

But if, with all your heart, you lay hold of the claims of Christ, if you will pick up the crucible of faith and, pressing it to your lips, will drink deeply of the water that Christ alone can give, then you will know the joy of complete and final satisfaction. For Jesus said, verse 15,

AWhoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him
will never thirst again.@"

Yes, those were long and weary hours Jesus spent by the well that morning, waiting until the woman who came to see a man left proclaiming a Savior. But His wait was rewarded. Contempt was turned to communion. Rudeness was supplanted by reality. For that morning, as He sat beneath the scorching sun, a soul was reborn. A pilgrim progressed from scorn to certainty, from skepticism to salvation.

To be sure, as I have said, it was the story of a particular pilgrim=s progress. But this morning, it can be your story, too. For this is the promise of scripture: AYou shall seek me, and find me when you search for me with all your heart.@