

“Jesus Actually Spoke to Her, Really?” Grace Episcopal, Asheville
The Rev. Gary Coffey Lent 3 March 23, 2014

Sears, formerly Sears and Roebuck Company, has been around a long time. In fact, when I attended UNC-A, I worked at Sears part time pumping gas. They used to have gas pumps right there outside of the Auto Center. It was interesting because it was during the gas shortage where cars would line up for blocks waiting for gas, and then when our gas station ran out, they would go and line up somewhere else. Those were the days, right?

Anyway, I was reminded of Sears’ success as I read today’s Gospel. Does anyone here know Sears’ motto or promise to those who shop there? Yes, satisfaction guaranteed or your money back. Those of us who have done some auto mechanic work or any kind of work with Sears tools know that if the tool breaks or even wears out, you take it back to Sears and they will replace it with a new one, no questions asked. Sears is the place to shop for tools.

I haven’t been in Sears for a while now. I don’t know how the sales staff are, but don’t you just love going into a store where the person waiting on you is absolutely focused on helping you find what you need. Chances are, you want to go back to a store like that, don’t you?

My wife Astrid was telling me about two plant nurseries here in town which shall remain nameless. She went to both last week trying to get some help with the diagnosis and treatment of a disease on one of our plants. At one store, they acted like they didn’t care whether they helped her or not. At the other nursery, the person really took time trying to figure it out and help her with it. Which store do you think will get our future business?

For stores like Sears and that one plant nursery that tried to be helpful, the answer is yes, if they can possibly make it yes. A business that cares will do whatever it can to serve the customer. It is this kind of service that was exemplified by our Lord in today's Gospel.

You see, there were all kinds of reasons for the answer to be no in Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well. First of all, in that culture, men did not address women that they did not know. Jesus spoke to her anyway. Jews looked down their noses at and had no dealings with what they considered half-breed Samaritans. This woman was a Samaritan and Jesus spoke to her anyway despite her ethnicity. The Jews had their religion and the Samaritans had theirs and were seen as heretics by the Jews. Therefore, there was a religious reason for Jesus to ignore this woman. Jesus spoke to her anyway. And remember, Jesus had intimate knowledge of this woman's personal life. So there were moral reasons to keep him from speaking to such a woman. Jesus spoke to her anyway.

Despite, cultural, ethnic, religious and moral taboos, Jesus struck up a conversation with this Samaritan woman at the well. Why did Jesus ignore all of the rules and speak to her anyway? Jesus spoke to her because he saw her for who she really was, a precious child of God. And he spoke to her because He had something for her, something that would change her life forever. Something that would take away her shame, and would finally give her the real love for which she had been searching.

How do we know that she was ashamed of her past? We know because she was at the well in the middle of the day. No one in her right mind would come to draw water and carry it home in the hottest part of the day. One would only do that if that person didn't want to run into others. Others who looked down on her, others who talked about her behind her back, others who thought they were better than she was, others who would ignore her and not speak to her. And beloved know this. These others whom the woman was avoiding were most likely good church people, the ones who thought they were living life correctly, according to the rules. You see, good church people were taught to eschew the lifestyle this woman had been living and rightly so. Where the problem comes in for us as church people is when we mistakenly look down on the person trapped in such a life.

Oh, you say, now wait a minute, Preacher. What do you mean trapped in such a lifestyle? This woman had free will just like everyone else. She chose the life she was leading. Did she, really? Do you know how she was treated as a child, what kind of abuse she may have suffered? Do you know that she didn't make the cheerleading squad because she wasn't as pretty or popular as the other girls or because her family had no money for the uniform? Be careful, church person. Be careful about the assumptions that you make, because you will never be looking at the full picture. Only God sees the full picture and God's in the rescue business.

God's in the rescue business. Hence Jesus' conversation with the woman. He said to her, "Everyone who drinks the water out of this well will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

The woman, misunderstanding a bit, replied, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

At this point, Jesus knew that He needed to reveal Himself to her. In order to do so, He asked her about her life situation and then provided for her information that, as a stranger to that area, He could only have known supernaturally. The worship and beliefs of Samaritans were very similar to the Jews. So, the woman, when Jesus revealed this intimate knowledge of her life, that really, only she probably knew for sure, when Jesus revealed this, she would know He was some kind of prophet from God, and she said so.

However, faced with the fact that Jesus knew this about her, she abruptly changed the subject. In effect, she said, “How about those Tarheels!” when she started talking about where the Jews worship and where the Samaritans worship. Faced with her sordid life, in effect, she is saying, “Hey, let’s talk about something else for a while.”

Jesus is fine with that because now, at least she knows He is a prophet. They can talk church, now, if she wants to. Jesus talks to her about the necessity of worshipping in spirit and in truth, with our adoration of God at the center of all that we say and do in worship. Then she says, “I know that Messiah is coming. When He comes, He will proclaim all things to us.”

Jesus responds, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you. I am the Messiah.”

We know that the woman received that living water from Jesus when she asked him for it because of what happened next.

When Jesus revealed Himself to her as the Messiah, she was so excited that she left the water jar at the well, and went to find her bishop with the hopes of going to seminary for three years so that she could tell people about Jesus. NO, that's not what the text says!!!!

It says that she became a new person. It certainly says that between the lines. Because she rushes back to her village in her excitement to the very people that she had previously been trying to avoid, probably because of her shame and their criticism of her. Without that shame, she rushes into the village and says to everyone she can find, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can He?" Hearing this woman's excitement, despite her past, they listened to her and headed out to the well to see Jesus. An excited witness who has been touched by God is hard to ignore.

In the meantime, the disciples get back with food. Jesus says to them that His food is to do God's work and bring in the harvest of people who are waiting to be ushered into the Kingdom of God.

Jesus said that the disciples, his disciples, were to enter in and harvest folks over which others have labored. However it happened to each individual, these folks were then and are now waiting to be ushered into the Kingdom.

Let's think of an example of this in our day and time. Let's say that faithful parents have tried to influence their children for Christ. For whatever reason, these children sort of ignored it all. But the seed was planted, and in time will germinate and grow within these children. After a while, after some experiences in the world during which they haven't really considered their faith, things start coming back to them. They remember the words of Jesus...

“Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. This is my Body which is given for you. This is my blood which is shed for you.”

These now adult children think to themselves, “I wonder if it could be real. I wonder if Jesus is there waiting like He said He would be.”

So, they come to our church to check it out. My hope is, our hope as a community is, that we, like that helpful nursery in town, will be falling all over ourselves trying to serve them. My hope is, our hope is, that they will find in us people like Jesus who are willing to throw out all of the prejudices and break down all of the barriers and make the answer YES. Yes, child, you have come to the right place. Welcome home! Enter into this Kingdom that was prepared for you before the foundation of the world. Enter into our joy as we receive and follow this Messiah together.

But what about those ripe ones out there who don't come to us? Like the woman, Beloved, we have got to go to them. We go being ourselves, loving people who love them and who love God. Like the woman, we don't need to go to seminary. We don't even need to be confirmed. Like her, we just need to know who Jesus is.

We know that the fields are still ripe for the harvest.

“Lord, send us, we pray, even plain old people like us, into your harvest that those who are waiting, waiting for us, may find that living water gushing up from within them to eternal life! Amen.”