

LAY IT ALL OUT

Third in series: "People Can Change!"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
March 25, 1984 John 4:4-42

He was tired. They had walked all morning, and I understand the terrain does not make for easy hiking. It was noon. The sun was high. The dust was heavy. Jesus was tired, hot, thirsty and hungry. I wonder if Jesus became irritable when he was tired, hungry and thirsty, as we do! The disciples went into town to buy food for lunch, and Jesus sat down to rest by Jacob's well. The well was located in the province of Samaria, and when a Samaritan woman came to draw some water out of the well, Jesus asked her for a drink, and the world has not been the same since! A simple act, we think, but the world was changed! The woman was changed. The local village was changed. The old, tired ways of thinking were changed. And it all began with the act of Jesus, asking for a drink of water from a Samaritan woman.

We are looking at change this sermon series. Many people want to change--themselves or something about themselves or their situation. People today are restless and want to improve. We have seen that the reality of sin makes change difficult. Especially difficult is it to change oneself. Sin is self-centeredness, and real change occurs when God moves in a person's life, changing the orientation from self to God, and that change is so profound, it is as if one is born all over again. For God to change us cost God a great deal--his own Son. The life force of Jesus Christ was poured out on the cross so that you and I might be born again into the kingdom of God. How does this happen in a person's life? What is the process? What do you and I do? Today's passage and subsequent sermons in this series give some clues.

First, God takes the initiative. To be born again into God's kingdom, to change drastically, is first of all, God's act, God's deed, God's grace. In our story today, Jesus approached the Samaritan woman. He asked her to give him a drink of water. He had no container with which to hold water, and he had no rope with which to lower a container down into the well. So, Jesus asked the woman if he might have a drink from her water jar.

The woman was astounded, as would have been anyone else who might have been present. She probably reacted with a gasp and a jerk, probably spilled some water. "You, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink of water? You talk to me? You would drink out of my cup? I don't believe it!"

We need some geography and history here to understand the significance of the request. Samaria was a province between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. There was a long way around which most Jews took so they wouldn't have to walk through Samaria, but some took the short cut as did Jesus and his disciples this particular day. After the reign of King Solomon, who was an unfortunately inept administrator, the nation had a civil war and divided into two: Samaria was the capital of the northern kingdom called Israel; the residents were called Israelites and later Samaritans. Jerusalem was the capital of the southern kingdom called Judah (later Judea); the residents were called Jews. In 720 B.C., Assyria conquered Israel and carried off the leaders. Foreigners then moved in, and intermarriage between the Israelites and the foreigners occurred, which horrified the Jews. When Judah was later conquered by the Babylonians, the Jews remained pure, and when they returned to Jerusalem, they rejected any kind of relationship with the Samaritans. The Jews felt the Samaritans were mongrels and an insult to their religion. By the time of Jesus, there had been 400 years of this hatred. No Jew would have anything to do with a Samaritan, and certainly would not eat with a Samaritan or drink from a Samaritan's cup. You can sense the significance of Jesus' definition of a neighbor: a Samaritan who befriended

the hurting Jew abandoned by the side of the road. So, for Jesus to ask for a drink of water from a Samaritan cut across centuries of hostility. The conflict of the present-day Middle East is not new.

But that was not the entire reason for the woman's astonishment. The real scandal was that Jesus, a man, talked to her, a woman! It was less surprising for a Jew to speak to a Samaritan than for a man to speak to a woman. It was against the rabbinic law for a man to talk to a woman in the street even if she were his wife. A Jew thanked God daily that he was not born a woman. Rabbis used to debate whether women had souls. Women had no civil rights and took almost no part in religious ceremonies. Jesus asked for a drink of water not only from a Samaritan, but from a woman, and the world has not been the same!

Jesus broke through centuries of prejudice, discrimination, oppression and just plain stupidity. The gospel of John proclaims the universality of the gospel. Jesus is not just the Saviour of the Jews but of the whole world: all people, colors, classes, national origins. There is nothing you have done, nothing in your deeds, nothing in your background that can separate you from the love of God! Jesus breaks through all barriers. Jesus breaks through all fantasies, pretenses, nonsense we tell ourselves, like: "Oh, I can't do that!" Or, "I'm not wise enough!" Or, "our church doesn't have the resources to do that." Or, "other people are better than I." Or, "you can't change human nature!" How many children, how many youths, how many people have been sentenced to mediocrity because someone said, "You can't change human nature." Jesus answers, "Hogwash!" to all such excuses, rationalizations, and cover-ups. Cover-up is sin, and persons can change. Persons can change because God takes the initiative.

Jesus not only asked the woman for a drink of water, he offered her living water. Jesus said, "Whoever drinks the water that I give will never thirst again, for the water will become a spring inside you, providing you with life, energy, zest, resulting in eternal life, the kingdom of God." Jesus offers the kingdom of God to well up within a person like a spring. We had a spring in our "back forty" as we called it-- 40 acres which served as a pasture. I delighted in digging the leaves away so the spring would run freely, filling the tank for the cows. I delighted in drinking the spring water, for it was always cool, clean, and so refreshing. Jesus offered the woman the Holy Spirit, a new life, like an ever-flowing spring.

Secondly--the second step in the process of change--the woman responded with the desire, the request for such water. She responded to God's offer with a "Yes." Now, notice she was not comprehending all that he was saying. She didn't quite understand, but she responded according to her limited understanding, and it was enough. She said, "Oh, give me some of that water so I will not have to come to this well day after day and draw water." She thought he was talking about drinking water, not realizing he was talking about living water, new-birth water. Most of us do not know the full depths of what we are asking or of what we are getting into when we turn to God. Little did I know that I would end up in First Church Palo Alto when I, as a Minnesota farm boy, responded to God, and gave my life to Jesus Christ. We don't know all that is involved. Some may expect to get rich. Some may want to be rescued. Some may want a problem solved. Some may want a healing for self or a loved one. But, whatever the understanding, Jesus accepts the response. He didn't put the woman down because she misunderstood. He led her by the hand through the process to experiencing the living water.

Perhaps I shouldn't say, "led her by the hand." What he did was hit her between the eyes with her life! The third step in the process of being changed by God is to lay it all out. Open yourself in all honesty and take a good look. Jesus offered her the living water, a new life. She responded according to her limited understanding

Then Jesus said, "Go call your husband." Right to the heart of the matter. Right to the heart of her life. She tried to evade. She tried to cover up as did Adam and Eve by blaming the snake and dressing in fig leaves. She said, "Oh, I don't have a husband." Jesus answered, "Right! You don't have one, you have five, and the one you are living with right now you haven't even married!" Now, living with someone these days isn't such a big deal anymore, but it was a big deal in Jesus' day, as it was in our society not too many years ago.

The third step is to see yourself, to be honest with yourself and with God. William Barclay has written, "No one ever really sees himself until he sees himself in the presence of Christ; and then he is appalled at the sight of himself." She faced herself, staggered by Jesus' insight and understanding. While the great preacher, C. S. Spurgeon was preaching a sermon, a little girl whispered to her mother, "Mother, how does he know what goes on in our house?" Jesus knows all, and change is dependent on a person's being honest. Lay it all out, get it out in the open. Lay your life exposed on the table. Reveal your life, don't hide it, and when your life is laid out for you and God to see, open and confessed, Jesus is not judgmental, but accepting. In that experience of disclosure, the woman learned and believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the one they were all expecting, the one who came on behalf of God to rescue, to save, to change.

Now, some people stop with the limited understanding, the limited request of God and are not willing to proceed to the next step of honesty. Honesty is called "repentance" in the Bible. Some are not willing to repent. Not willing or wanting to change that drastically, they are content with the crumbs of God, rather than the loaf; content to sip stagnant water, rather than to gulp cool, clear living water. In the act of repentance, in the act of responding to Christ with a resounding, "YES," you will be born again. You will see Christ as the Saviour, and experience the living water becoming a spring within you. The Holy Spirit will bless, make new, fill you with joy, love, compassion so profound, it is like being born all over again.

Fourth, the woman shared. She witnessed. She was so excited, she ran off to the village without her water jar. In the Middle East, water is a precious possession. She was so excited she ran off without her water jar to tell her fellow villagers about Jesus. "Come," she called. "He told me all that I ever did!" They followed, and they, too, believed in Jesus. The town was never the same. Jesus had disrupted traditions, overcome hostilities, accepted a loose woman despised by her village, and changed a town in the process.

How are people changed by God? Let me summarize this beautiful story. It presents one sure-fire method. God offers you a new life in Jesus Christ. It is God's act, God's grace. Respond with a "YES, Lord." Regardless of your limited understanding, say "yes" to Jesus. Lay it all out. Look at your life; be honest and open with yourself and before God. Look at yourself in the presence of Christ. Are there changes that need to be made? Accept the new life. Believe, trust, have the faith that Christ can change, that Christ can make you new. Act on the new experience by telling, witnessing, sharing with others what happened to you.

"L A Y I T A L L O U T"

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