

Sermon: Lent 3 (A)

St. Peter's, Norfolk

Text: John 4:5-42

Date: March 15, 2020

This morning's Gospel reading from John, the story of the *Samaritan Woman at the Well*, is one that is familiar to many of us. While most of time we read about Jesus talking to large crowds this story, like last week's story about Nicodemus, is one of the many one-on-one encounters Jesus had with people. The woman and Jesus talked for a while, and she was amazed at what he had to say about her and about himself. Their conversation ended with Jesus' revelation to the woman that he is the long awaited Messiah. I'd like to focus today on what happens next....what happens after the woman's encounter with Jesus. John writes:

"Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, 'Come and see this man..... they came out of the town and made their way to Jesus. Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony.....they urged Jesus to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And....many more became believers. (John 4:28-30, 39-42) page 1053

There is a sales strategy that businesses/corporations have known about for years. Many people have bought products because of it. We use this strategy to encourage people to enroll their children in our Day School. The church has known about this strategy for a long time. But while the business world has continued to take advantage of its effectiveness, the church has somehow let this strategy slide to the wayside. It has the power to help others make decisions, and it can profoundly shape and influence the lives of countless people. What is this strategy? It's **personal testimony!**

We often underestimate the power of personal testimony- particularly in the church. And yet, it's been shown that one person's testimony can have immense power- particularly when it is inspired by an encounter with Jesus Christ. The truth is: personal testimony- the ability (and the willingness) to share with others some of our own experiences from our journey of faith is critical to the growth of Christianity and God's kingdom; and I believe the *Samaritan Woman at the Well* has a great deal to teach us about sharing our faith and about the impact that can have on others. I'd like to highlight three things this morning.

The first thing we can learn from her is this- **when we have truly experienced Jesus, we can't help but talk about it to others.** The Samaritan woman didn't hesitate a moment to share her encounter with Jesus with the rest of her town. She wanted them to hear her story. Storytelling, I believe, is fast becoming a lost art. For thousands of years, tribes and nations (and even families) have kept their histories and genealogies alive through the tradition of storytelling- perhaps you are a story teller in your own family. Storytelling is part of the reason many people find the New Testament of the Bible so appealing. It's filled with personal, eye-witness accounts of Jesus and God at work in people's lives. Jesus was, of course, the master storyteller. When we practice something, we get good at it, and so the ancients were wonderful storytellers. But sadly, that tradition seems to be fading away.

But for Christians (for disciples or followers of Jesus) ***"being out of practice"*** is not really a good excuse (is it?) because good testimonies are a product of a thankful heart. Jesus is constantly at work in our lives, just as he was working in the life of the *Woman at the Well*. And if we are truly thankful (if we feel blessed) then the sharing with others, of what God is doing in our lives, should be a natural outgrowth of our gratitude. The truth is, when we are thankful, we can't help but want to tell others- just like the *Samaritan Woman at the Well*. The question becomes- will we do it?

Secondly, **personal testimony can elicit action from those who hear it.** This is the part that successful businesses use to their advantage. Satisfied customers are a far better advertisement than the slickest commercial any New York marketing firms can produce. Word of mouth, as our Gospel story bears out, is a powerful motivator- especially when the words come from the heart. The *Woman at the Well* told her story and others took action....they began to search for Jesus and they found him.

Many years ago, when I was serving as Assistant Rector at a church in Texas, one of our outreach ministries there was to a Woman's Shelter in Plano, near Dallas. Our ministry to that shelter consisted mainly of collecting clothing and toiletries and delivering them each week, along with a check from those church members who decided to make monetary donations. Now, Christ Church was a very large church (nearly 1,000 ASA) so the check was always very sizeable.

Well, one day I received a phone call from the Director of the Shelter. There was a woman staying there with her three young children. It seems the children's father decided one day he didn't want to be a father and a husband any longer, so he just up and left town. He became a dead beat dad and she and the children ended up at the shelter. While at the shelter, and through the efforts of some local clergy, the woman gave her life to Christ and she and her three children were all baptized. Over the next few months she received a great deal of financial support from the shelter.

The woman was so thankful for all the help and support she and her children had received from so many people that she wanted to begin publicly thanking them. She wanted to come to Christ Church (along with her children) to thank us but also to share her story with us and how God had blessed her and her children. She had nothing to give but her story (her personal testimony) and she wanted to offer that as her gift to us.

Well, she and her children came to all three of our services one Sunday and she told her story. It was a powerful testimony....there were smiles and tears and cheers and applause. We took up a special offering that day for the shelter which totaled thousands of dollars and many church members wanted to know how they could become more involved (hands on) in the ministry to the shelter.

And as wonderful as all that was, the most exciting thing that happened that day, is that nearly 25 people who heard that woman's testimony that day, decided they needed to get more serious about their relationship with God; and over the next few weeks gave their lives to Christ and began a new journey of faith.

Personal testimony can elicit action from those who hear it

Which leads right into the third lesson we can learn from the *Samaritan Woman at the Well*: **when we witness to others and they experience Jesus for themselves, God's kingdom grows and Jesus is glorified.** Personal testimony draws people to Jesus, but it's when we experience Christ's personal presence in our lives that we are changed forever. We are given, through our encounters with Jesus, a story of our own to tell.

When the *Samaritan Woman at the Well* met Jesus, she was “**amazed**” and she was changed. She shared that encounter with others; and they believed because of her testimony.

But it didn’t end there. The people with whom she shared her experience wanted to experience Jesus for themselves and so, they set out to find him. They found him and their faith was strengthened even more. Remember what they said? “**We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.**” The people wanted Jesus to stay- and he did. Once we truly experience Jesus, we never want our lives to be void of his presence. The people of the village spread the word; and more and more people were converted as the cycle of personal testimony and belief continued. And it all started with the personal (heartfelt) testimony of one woman.

Are you seeing what I’m seeing in all of this? This story of the *Samaritan Woman at the Well* is a model for church growth. It’s so simple, and yet it so often eludes us- **as we share our faith experiences (as we share our stories) others are drawn to Jesus.** You might think of a worship service (such as this) as the “**well**” in today’s story. People come to worship in order to encounter Jesus and his love. That encounter might happen through the reading of Scripture, or the singing of hymns, or the sermon, or the prayers, or at the rail during Holy Communion. When they do meet him, they share the experience with others and, in turn, more people come to worship. That’s the model!

My friends, the Spirit of Christ is contagious in much the same way as a wildfire. It only takes a spark to get a fire going. Once a church is ignited for Jesus Christ, the passion is self-perpetuating. The story of the *Woman at the Well* shows us that an entire community can be transformed by the testimony of one personal encounter with Jesus. It only takes a spark to get a fire going- are you willing to be a spark that ignites a fire? Have you experienced Jesus Christ lately? Has Jesus changed your life in any way? If he has, then what is it that standing between you and telling the story that God wants you to share with others?

I’m asking each of you this morning to earnestly pray about that and ask God to reveal new insights and new testimonies in your life that you can easily share with others. I want St. Peter’s to be a church that lives into its mission statement to

“proclaim our faith [in Jesus Christ] through word and deed.” In the weeks ahead, let me know if you would be willing to come forward some Sunday morning and give a brief (3-5) minute personal testimony of what God has done in your life. Or if you would be willing to write a brief story about an encounter you have had with Jesus that could be included in an issue of *The Call*- our monthly newsletter.

My friends, we need to do this because this is what disciples do...this is what followers do! They become storytellers....they share their testimonies with others, so the kingdom of God can grow. Won't you be a storyteller? Amen.