

Three Strikes – No Outs
John 4:5-26, 39-42
March 19, 2017 – Third Sunday of Lent

The story of the woman at the well is among my favorites in the entire Bible; it's among my favorites because, more than any other writing, it demonstrates the inclusivity of Jesus. The story begins by telling us that Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar.

Strike One – A few verses later, we read, “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.” That, my friends, is an understatement. Other translations say, “Jews don’t associate with Samaritans,” or “Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.” The fact is, the Jews hated the Samaritans. While the Samaritans considered themselves to be Jewish, tracing their lineage back through Jacob to Abraham, they didn’t worship in the same ways that “real” Jerusalem Jews worshiped. Furthermore, history and tradition states that they did not suffer the Babylonian exile in the same ways the “real” Jews did. Samaria lies between Judea and Galilee. The shortest way to get from Judea to Galilee was to pass through Samaria. Still many Jews would go around – choosing instead to head east from Jerusalem to Jericho and then travel up the east side of the Jordan River valley to Galilee. But not Jesus. No, Jesus heads straight through Samaria.

Now the land of Samaria, while it may be the shortest route is not easy traveling. It’s an arid and mountainous region. So Jesus, tired from his journey sits down at Jacob’s well; and there he encounters a Samaritan woman. Strike Two – not only is she a Samaritan, but she’s a woman. Jewish men did not associate with women that were not their relatives. This was an extremely patriarchal society. Women were not to come near men; and certain they could not touch them. Women were not allowed to enter into the central worship space in the temple. I spoke a few weeks back about the inequities between divorced women and divorced men. Men and women simply were not to interact with each other. But here, Jesus not only strikes up a conversation with this woman, but he asks her for a drink of water; and you can sorta’ hear the surprise in her response: “How is it that you a Jewish man ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?”

And so the conversation continues. In typical Johanine style, Jesus and this woman start talking past each other. The woman is concentrating on physical water, and Jesus is speaking of spiritual water – living water – the spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life. You know, for the past few weeks we’ve been speaking about light; but water is another special symbol. Without water, there is no life. Without the spiritual water of the living God, there is not spiritual life – indeed the soul is dead.

One of the first things I did when I came to this church was to move our baptismal font from someplace over there up onto the chancel. Actually, I'd love it if it were truly front and center; but that's not practical. Still, I want it where everyone can see it, where it will be a constant reminder of your baptism. When we do a renewal of baptism in this church, I put a drop of water on your forehead, and say "Remember your baptism and be thankful." It's my hope that every time you take a seat in our sanctuary, every time you look at our chancel, you will look at the font, and remember your baptism – living water, washing the grace, the amazing love of God into every soul. It was John the Baptist who said, "I baptize you with water, but the one coming after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Then remember last week, our good Jewish Pharisee, Nicodemus is told that he must be born of water and spirit. Living water – the gift for the life of the soul. Sadly, or perhaps with a bit of John's comic twist, our Samaritan woman still doesn't "get it," as she asks Jesus to give her some of this special water so she won't need to make these daily trips to the well.

At this point, Jesus shifts the conversation and, Strike Three. Jesus tells her to go get her husband and then come back to the well; and she replies that she does not have a husband. Then Jesus acknowledges that she has had five husbands, that the man she is with now is not her husband. Strike Three indeed. It seems our Samaritan woman is an adulterous.

This time it's the woman that changes the conversation, as she states, "We worship on this mountain, but your people say it is necessary to worship in Jerusalem." One of the key differences between Jews and Samaritans – location. And what does Jesus say, "No, no, no. It's not about location. God doesn't live on some mountaintop, either here or in Jerusalem. God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth."

I love that verse. There is so much packed into that verse. God is a Spirit. It helps define that idea that the living God, or what I sometimes call the spirit of the risen Christ walks with us, everywhere we go. God is with us in everything we do. There's that promise of Christ again – to be with us always. And like so much in the Bible, along with the promise is the call – we must worship in spirit and in truth.

You know, different people find meaning in different styles of worship, and that's good. I celebrate diversity. I certainly have my favorite worship styles, and I trust you do as well. But I tell you, the style doesn't matter as long as the worship is authentic. Before coming to North Olmsted, I served a church with two other pastors. Occasionally the Senior Pastor would apologize to me because I was not given equal time in the pulpit or equal opportunities to share in worship. My response was always the same – it doesn't matter. Worship is not about me. This isn't "a show." Worship is about our relationship with God. Worship is about

furthering our relationship with God, and worship is about going forth into the world to lead a life fueled by that relationship. That's worship in spirit and in truth. I'm fine with any worship that does that; and I take great issue with any worship that does anything contrary to that.

But back to our Samaritan woman. . . She proceeds in confessing a faith in the coming of the Messiah; and Jesus tells her, "I am he" – or in Greek simply "I AM" the sacred name of God. And finally, finally the woman at least half-way "gets it." She leaves her jar, and goes into the city to spread the good news – all the while asking, "Could this man be the Messiah?" Our story concludes. . . Many Samaritans came to believe because of the woman's testimony, and they came to Jesus, and they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days.

Friends, according to the culture of the time, the story's leading lady had three strikes against her: She was a Samaritan; she was a woman; and she was an adulterous; and Jesus chose her to be the one to bring an entire community of "outsiders" to Christ.

Yes, I love the story of the Woman at the Well. If Jesus could choose an adulterous woman from Samaria, not only to receive living water, but to be the source, to bring the entire Samaritan community to living water, what bounds could he possibly have.

According to Jewish society, this woman has three strikes against her; but according to Jesus she was not out. No, it doesn't matter how many strikes you may have, or how many strikes your neighbor may have, this isn't baseball; and nobody strikes out with the living Christ.

Praise be to God for the gift of living water and the promise of eternal life.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,

May we never forget that nobody strikes out with you.

May we not only experience your living water, your gift of the Spirit,

but may we bring others to share the Good News of life with you.

This we pray in your holy name.

Amen.

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