

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

When Sower and Reaper Rejoice Together

John 4:5-42

Sometimes people just want to be alone. No particular reason. We've all felt that way. Can't really explain it. We just want to be alone. Five minutes might be enough. Five minutes ALONE, that is! No one talking to you. No child clinging to you. Nobody around, period. Maybe you're traveling on an airplane. You're tired or nervous. So you lay your head back, close your eyes. Time alone. Maybe you're a musician wanting to practice. You look for empty room where you can rehearse without distraction. Time alone. Maybe you're a minister, worn out from all the needs around you. Sometimes people just want to be alone whatever the reason.

Sometimes even Jesus wanted to be alone. Today we catch him beside Jacob's well. He was weary, "Tired out by his journey," John says. Was that all? His conversation with Nicodemus was a bust. Nicodemus, a teacher! Missed the whole point. To add insult to injury, the Pharisees were creating an artificial competition between John and Jesus. Counting up baptisms, they were. Keeping score! Who baptized more, John or Jesus? So Jesus headed home to Galilee. Along the way he pulled into a rest stop in Samaria. He sent his disciples off to buy food. When they got back he didn't eat it. He told them, "I have food you don't know about." So their shopping trip was a lark all along, an excuse to get him some alone time. Can't blame him. He was tired, worn out. Like most of us at times like that, he just needed to be by himself.

The Samaritan woman wanted to be alone. That's for sure. Why else would she go to the well at noon? Everybody went to the well early. Kind of like playing golf. Everybody wants the early tee times. Not the woman of this story. Mid-day, when nobody would be there. That's when she went. Can't blame her. Talk of the town! Five husbands! The scandal of it all. Had they died, leaving her widowed? Did they just get tired of her and throw her out? Maybe she was just unlucky at love, as they say! Could be any combination of the above. But! But, there's no support for the traditional conclusion that she was an immoral woman. Yes, she was living with a man. They weren't married. Does that mean she was immoral? What other options did she have? We don't know. In any case, she didn't want to see anybody at the well. So she went at noon when nobody would be there. Cast-off . . . a woman scorned. No wonder she wanted to be alone!

Sometimes, being alone just isn't possible. Try as you might, someone walks in, or the phone rings. Was it God's will or coincidence that brought Jesus and the woman together? Is it God's will or coincidence when someone intrudes on our alone time? Who knows? We Presbyterians don't have much time for chance or coincidence. Our Sovereign God is so powerful, so attentive to detail, that every event points to God's presence. No, that doesn't mean everything is God's will. It does mean that God's will underlies whatever happens. "Everything works for good with those who love God," Paul says. That doesn't mean "Everything is good." It does mean God has power over everything. Even evil falls under God's power. Evil events may be transformed by God's grace, so that good can come about. God acts in the world daily. Faith gives us eyes to see. The woman didn't just happen to meet Jesus. God had a hand in it. "Jesus had to go through Samaria," John says. Being alone wasn't an option.

It's a good thing it wasn't an option. Just look what happened! The Spirit led Jesus into Samaria and changed the course of history. Changed himself, too, or should we say he changed the church? Everybody knows the woman changed. What a transformation! Once she avoided all the towns-people. Now she ran through town telling everyone, "This man told me everything I ever did. He can't be the messiah, can he?" Quite a change. Everybody notices her transformation. Now take a look at Jesus. At the beginning of the story he was tired. Maybe he was singing the blues over Nicodemus and the Pharisees. Couldn't blame him if he was. But by the end of the story he's singing: "Bringing in the sheaves." Talk about a change! It's a good thing being alone wasn't an option. Jesus' conversation with that woman changed him, too.

So we see how God reaches out to touch Jesus, to strengthen him in a time of need. Same way God reaches out to touch us. Here's a case of the minister being ministered to by the parishioner. Here we see the healer being healed by the patient. Notice the tired Savior has been rejuvenated. What an interesting story! Not just good news for a Samaritan woman and her town. It's good news for Jesus, too. And for the church. God nurtures us through our nurturing others. God reaches out to us as we reach out to others. Jesus receives as well as gives. So do we. An unexpected encounter with the holy fills Jesus, the woman, and us full of energy, excitement, enthusiasm and great joy.

Isn't that just like God, to give people hope in surprising ways? Doesn't it square with our own experience? Somehow, in the midst of the ordinariness of life, God catches us up in conversation with the holy, always in unexpected ways. Maybe we're on that airplane, just wanting to be alone. Instead we see two beady little eyes peering over the seat ahead. A squeaky little voice says, "Hi! My name is Ben, what's yours?" "I'm three years old. How old are you?" Our first inclination? Roll back the eyes and pray, "God help me. I don't need this." But what happens if we engage little Ben in conversation? What then? Don't know for sure. All we can say is, one thing leads to another. If you don't talk to him, nothing happens. If you do? Sometimes, when you least expect it, a whole new world opens up. Isn't that just like God, to work in such marvelously unexpected ways?

The outcome of any story depends somewhat on the characters in it. What would've happened if Jesus had clung to old prejudices? That's pretty easy to do, isn't it? That's what the disciples would have done. A Samaritan woman approaches. He turns away. No conversation. No transformation. Or what if the woman had just given him a drink and gone home? No curiosity about this stranger. No conversation. Nothing would've happened. No change. And we? If we stick with old prejudices? If we refuse to talk with strangers who break old taboos? No transformation. If we merely meet a need, but take no personal interest in the other person? No change. No transformation. Unexpected encounters with the holy happen every day. When we recognize ourselves in the story, we get caught up in the excitement of it all. Messiah is coming! We know that. But today? In our midst?

You and I never know when the Holy One will ask us for a glass of water, or a slice of bread. "Excuse me, can you tell me how to get to the hospital?" Simple question. An unexpected, innocent intrusion, like, "Give me a drink." "Buddy, can you spare a dime?" Next time someone greets you, even if you want to be alone, remember this story. The stranger at the tee who wants to join your threesome. Remember. The visitor next to you in the pew. Remember. Society's outcast. The wealthy. The isolated. Remember. The fields are ripe for harvest. The reaper is already gathering fruit for eternal life so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. Each day is full of opportunities for new life.

We began with two people who wanted to be alone. The holy One had other plans. One spoke. The other listened, really listened. Each took a personal interest in the other. One trusted God, and looked for unexpected opportunities. The other boldly grabbed when opportunity knocked. Before long everybody was having a ball, saying: "This is truly the savior of the world." Even Nicodemus got the word. He was one of those who buried Jesus, remember? The disciples, too, all were transformed after his death and resurrection. And us? Who knows what might happen when we engage in conversation with the holy? One thing leads to another. All of a sudden, we realize that we believe not because others have told us, but because we've heard for ourselves. When that happens, our eyes open wide. We catch our breath, pinch ourselves to see if we're dreaming. Then we jump for joy, like a Samaritan woman who ran through her town shouting: "He can't be the messiah, can he?" Oh, but he can! Truly he is the Savior of the world.