

Unlikely Witness

John 4:27–42 (NRSV)

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” **28** Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, **29** “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” **30** They left the city and were on their way to him. . . . **39** Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” **40** So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. **41** And many more believed because of his word. **42** They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Introduction. A little over a month ago, Patty and I were worshiping in our oldest son's church in the Kingsport area when the woman sharing the children's message shared how people sometimes go through difficult times in life that hurt. Then she asked the children around her a question. While it seemed very innocent and the answer obvious for anyone schooled the church answer which is "Jesus," not every three year old understood the rules. She asked, "Where do we go when we don't feel good?" Without missing a beat a three year old responded, "To Dollywood!" It took quite a bit of time to bring the whole congregation back under control.

Those words of that small girl stirred in the young minds in that sanctuary a desire to visit Dollywood. I imagine several went home and urged their parents to take them.

During the month of November, we have been focusing on the importance of being an invitational congregation. People around us need the Lord. People are hurting. People are searching for something more, something deeper than they have experienced. People are looking for others who will love them as they are. Hopefully we believe and know that in Christ those matters can be addressed. Hopefully we believe that here at OUMC people can truly encounter Jesus. For that to happen, inviting people is critical.

Jesus at the Well.

There are few stories in the Bible that stir my imagination more than the story of woman Jesus encountered at the well near the town of Sychar in Samaria. The story is richer than a seven layer double chocolate cake with inch icing on top and between the layers. I want to share a small slice this morning. (I encourage you to take open this passage and feast on his richness when you are at home.)

While Jesus and his band were traveling, they decided to pass through the territory of Samaria. After having walked for several hours, they came to a well about a ½ mile from a small town. Jesus sent the guys into the town to buy some lunch while he rested near the well.

After the guys were out of sight, a woman from the town came to the well to draw water. So Jesus asked her for a drink. His request shocked the woman because she was a Samaritan who was looked down on by Jews as being half breeds traitors to the true faith. Additionally she was a woman and no respectful Jewish man would speak to woman in a public setting. The proper etiquette of the day would have been for Jesus to have ignored her.

He not only asked for a drink of water but engaged her in a deep conversation that led to some huge theological questions and eventually to some very personal matters for the woman. Jesus had insight that this woman had been married multiple times and was at that moment living with a man to whom she was not married. This led the woman to conclude he was a prophet because he knew that information even though she had not disclosed it to him. Then she raised the subject of a Messiah was coming. Jesus told her he was that Messiah.

Try if you can to wrap your mind around this woman's experience. She probably was getting water from this well because she was not welcomed among the women water gatherers at the well inside the town. She had a poor reputation as a wife. And here she encounters a Jew, a man, a prophet and the Messiah who not only acknowledged her existence but cared enough to talk with her on her level. Her life in those moments with Jesus had been deeply touched and transformed.

How has Jesus Christ impacted your life? You may be one of those persons whose life was radically changed by Jesus. He literally changed your trajectory by 180 degrees. On the other hand, you may have been on this journey with Jesus a long time and it is truly integrated into who you are.

A couple of months ago I began reading a book by Peter Scazzero that introduced me to an ancient Christian practice called the Daily Examen which is a daily prayer reflection intended to

help one see where God showed up during that day. I am finding this practice to be quite refreshing as I see more and more how the Lord is present and active in my life and the world around me. **Where is God showing up in your life each day?**

Invitational and sharing barriers.

When any of us have a real sense of what God is up to and doing in our lives, there is birthed in us the desire to share this with others – either in the form of telling what happened or wanting them to experience such things. In the story, we see the woman at the well was eager to share the message with others. For as soon as the disciples returned and interrupted her conversation with Jesus, she went into her hometown to share with others.

When it comes to sharing our story or inviting people to places (such as the church) where they can have an encounter with Jesus, **we often bump up against some barriers and challenges.** It is often easy for these to keep us from sharing and inviting.

The woman at the well faced one of **the great hurdles – her status and reputation.** First of all she was a woman in a culture where women were given little voice in the public sphere. For her to speak out and tell what had happened to her was not “politically correct.” Who would respect her words as a woman?

Additionally, she had a reputation as a failure and woman who was looked on with suspicion. She had five failed marriages and living with a man to whom she was not married. She was not the epitome of moral virtue and healthy relationships. **Who would listen to such a woman?**

Often in reading scripture, I wonder why God made the choices He did. Why would God use a woman with such a checkered past to be such an important evangelist for Jesus? Shouldn't God have chosen the parish rabbi who was respected by everyone? Shouldn't God have used a morally fit person?

God's choice shows how He can use any of us who are available. One does not have to have certain status or position. As a matter of fact, sometimes those who lack the status carry more weight than those who do.

The woman at the well faced another issue that has paralyzed some. **She had deep questions that were yet unresolved.** First of all she had the question about orthodox worship – do we Samaritans do it right or do you Jews? After her encounter with Jesus she thought he might just be the Messiah but she was not quite sure. When she shared her story, she asked, **“Could this be the Messiah?”**

Often people are hesitant to have spiritual conversations, share their stories and invite people to church because they are afraid the other person may ask questions to which they do not know the answers. Additionally, most of us do have our own questions about faith and God. Few of us have resolved all the answers. **Having questions and not knowing all the answers does not disqualify for sharing and inviting.** I have often shared with people who have come to me with hard questions the response, “I don't know.” I have told them I share some of their questions as well.

The woman at the well was one of the least likely persons to in the gospels to invite folks to see Jesus. She had so many things against her. Yet her invitation was so simple – **“Come and see this man.”** The simplest of invitations can have a profound impact on people.

During Trunk or Treat, a fellow who has recently begun attending here shared with me he had invited a friend to come to worship. He was so excited because this friend had promised him he was coming. It is exciting when someone accepts our invitation.

Many among us face a challenge the woman at the well did not have. In her network of people and acquaintances, few if any knew anything about Jesus and none of them had believed in him. **No one in Sychar was a Jesus follower.**

The longer one follows Jesus the more likely it becomes that nearly all that person's friends and acquaintances are Christians and somewhat active in a church. For many of us, our friends are comprised of folks in our small group, some of whom we have known for 30 years. The neighbors we know attend church because we like being around other Christians rather than those who lifestyles are off putting to us. We often live in a Christian bubble. Often it leads us to think everybody loves Jesus and goes to church – NOT! (In reality, only about 30% are connected to a church in our area.)

So when it comes to an appeal such as we are having this month to invite people to church, our pool for invitation is often shallow. As a pastor, I am always delighted to see new people come into the church, particularly people who did not have a relationship with Jesus because they typically have many connections with people who are not yet followers of Jesus. They have people they can invite without stealing them from other churches. (If someone invites someone to attend here and they are active at Silverdale and they come, that may mean another family for us but the kingdom of Christ did not prosper. We want the Kingdom to grow as well.)

Where can we find people who we can invite? There is a significant pool that those of you who have been part of this congregation for a few years have to pull from. It is among those who have become inactive in the life of the congregation. Who knows it may be your invitation that will make the difference for them and they will start their journey back. Some of those folks want to come back but are embarrassed. Some wonder if anyone here misses them. Your contact may make their day and change their trajectory.

For all of us it is important to make intentional contacts with others for the sake of Christ. In our everyday ordinary lives we come in contact with people who do not know Jesus and have no church home. It may be the cashier at Walmart, the guy who cuts your lawn, the fellow who works in the clubhouse where you play golf, the server at a restaurant, your doctor, a class mate, the folks who walk in your neighborhood. Many of these people are going through stuff in the lives and need hope and direction. Many need to be part of a caring and loving community. Cultivating relationships with these persons and building rapport can not only change their lives but can change yours.

On the day of our Trunk or Treat, Patty and I stopped by Walmart to pick up a few things. The checkout lines were crowded and slow. We were behind a family who had a young girl maybe four years of age. Patty and the mother struck up a conversation. We heard this family was new to the area, they were ex-military and had two other children who were serving. They had few contacts. So Patty naturally invited them to attend our Trunk or Treat. I don't know if they came but they now know there is a church in their community and one day they show up.

FRAN –

A few decades ago, an acronym began circulating in the church world – FRAN. It was very popular in UM circles. It was a plan of evangelism (when the word was not so threatening and still used by many.) Essentially it was a plan where people were asked to name Family, Relatives, Associates and Neighbors who were not yet Christians and/or not involved in a church. The plan consisted of praying for those people, sharing your story and inviting them to church.

Enclosed in the bulletin is a Fran insert for you. I am asking you to think through who those people are in your life. I want you to write down their names. Begin praying daily for them. Think through what is going on a church here you can invite them to. Work on strengthening your relationship with them.