

THE SEARCH FOR LOVE

SERIES: ONE TO ONE

By Danny Hall

We just love to connect with a really good story. It is perhaps the most powerful way that we communicate. Most of us watch movies and television and read books. I watch a lot of sports, and somewhere along the line in a good sports event, they'll pull out a story about one of the players.

If we step back and think about it, the Bible is God's story. Often we think of the Bible as something other than that. Sometimes we think of it as a collection of great truths about who God is and who we are. But while there is amazing truth in the Scriptures, foundationally it is a story. And within the larger story of God are many stories of God's interaction with people. These are down-to-earth stories of both people who are seeking God and people who are opposing God.

We're going to look into the Gospel of John in this series. As John tells his story of Jesus, he highlights a number of personal encounters that Jesus had with individuals.

In our pastoral staff study we've been reading Eugene Peterson's book *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (1), in which he quotes a poem by Robert Browning called *A Death in the Desert*. I loved the lines he quoted, so I decided to read the whole poem. Well, it turned out to be fifteen pages long, full of dense imagery and allusions. It was marvelous, although I couldn't understand what in the world he was talking about in half of it. Other parts were truly brilliant. The poem is about the apostle John's living with Jesus and writing about it. These are the lines Eugene Peterson quoted:

“Truth, deadened of its absolute blaze,
Might need love's eye to pierce the o'erstretched doubt.”

Truth can be so familiar that it becomes deadened. Its grandeur is sometimes hard for us to comprehend. We might need “love's eye to pierce the o'erstretched doubt.” Love's eye is the love relationship between God and his people. Perhaps God will give us love's eye in this series to see behind the beautiful doctrine in Scripture to the life in the stories we read.

The first story we're going to look at is that of the Samaritan woman, in John 4. (We're doing this one before the story in John 3 because it closely parallels the story of Hagar, which Judy Herminghaus taught on July 23 [Discovery Paper 8208].) Let's read this wonderful story. John 4:1-42:

The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. When the Lord learned of this, he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

“Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?”

Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

“I have no husband,” she replied.

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

Jesus declared, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind

of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

The woman said, “I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

Then Jesus declared, “I who speak to you am he.”

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”

Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

Meanwhile his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.”

But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.”

Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?”

“My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more and then the harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.”

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers.

They said to the woman, “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.”

This story is filled with dramatic twists and turns right from the beginning.

Reaching across barriers

John tells us Jesus “had to go through Samaria.” This is not a statement about economy of travel, it’s a statement about purpose. You see, Jesus lived with a sense of mission, a sense of calling from God.

Now, most Jews wouldn’t travel through Samaria. They would go around by crossing the Jordan to the east, going along the other side of the river, and coming back across once they were past Samaria, because the Samaritans were such hated people. They were a mixed race that had arisen from intermarriage between Assyrians and Israelites after the Assyrian invasion of Israel (the northern kingdom), hundreds of years earlier. Most of the descendants of that intermarriage had settled in Samaria. The Jews looked on them as inferior half-breeds and hated them worse than Gentiles in many cases. They considered the Samaritans to be a perversion of Judaism that was not worthy of their consideration. So their prejudice was great, and they would avoid the Samaritans at all costs.

Jesus comes to this well outside of Sychar at noon when it’s hot, the disciples having gone off into the town to get some provisions, and in the encounter he has here, he breaks through cultural and social barriers right from the start.

She is a Samaritan, one of the most despised ethnic groups, so he crosses this social barrier. In some ways Jesus is putting his very respectability on the line here, because some would consider it totally improper for him to interact with this Samaritan woman at all. Yet he initiates this conversation. Not only that, he actually draws this woman into his own story. His first statement to her is, “Would you get me a drink?” He is inviting her to help meet a need of his.

Of course, her immediate reaction is, “Why are you talking to me? Don’t you understand I’m a Samaritan, and a woman you don’t know?”

He then begins a journey with her that will take her to a place that she could never have imagined when this conversation started. He begins with a superficial thing, water. As Jesus will often do in these stories, he starts with a physical need or something in the physical world, and moves beyond that to the deeper level of the spirit and the soul.

In this first step he takes her to a place of understanding her thirst. That is one of the first steps in our journey to an encounter with Christ.

He offers her living water. Now, John is building a portrait of the person of Jesus Christ out of the stories of his encounters with him, toward the specific end that he gives us at the end of the gospel, which is that we might believe in Jesus (John 20:31). And he often foreshadows themes to come by the way he builds the story. In chapter 7 Jesus is going to give a whole sermon about living water. This living water that Jesus offers is the Holy Spirit, who will come into a person’s life and well up in them from the deepest places of their soul, bringing overflowing life. Jesus wants this woman to understand that the thirst she feels is not really on the surface. It’s deep within her.

What is her response? “Sir, give me this water....” Wouldn’t you want water that would satisfy your thirst once and for all? Mysterious as it is, her heart longs for it.

But Jesus knows that in order for her to get this living water, she needs to understand the true nature of her thirst, because she's missing the point. So what's his next line? "Go, call your husband..."

Identifying the point of deepest need

Now, up until this point, we're not exactly sure of the tone of this woman's conversation with Jesus. After all, she's had five husbands, and is now living with a man who is not her husband. It's altogether possible that her demeanor with Jesus has even been flirtatious. Perhaps that's part of her way of dealing with men, and she's trying to feel the situation out in that manner, to see who this man is. But whatever has been going on in her mind or heart, the conversation has just taken an abrupt turn. Of course she gets a little defensive. "I have no husband."

"That's for sure. Not only do you not have one, you've had five, and you're living with a man who is not your husband."

Why does Jesus do this? You know, sometimes someone will tell me something like this. "I met this lady at work, and you know what? She's been married five times, and now she's shacking up with some guy!" Do you know what my first reaction is? I get judgmental. Can you believe somebody has trashed her life like that? But Jesus' motivation in exposing this area of this woman's life is not that he wants her to feel condemned, or wants to feel morally superior to her. He understands that for him to give her the living water that will slake her thirst forever at the deepest level of her soul, she has to understand her thirst. He has to take her to the place of her deepest need, to help her understand the emptiness of her life and how she has gone the wrong way. He can't help her find what she needs unless he takes her to where she confronts her deepest pain. That pain has been expressed in a quest for love, for some sense of affirmation of who she is as a person, in this life of serial love affairs, if you will.

You and I have found ourselves in that same place, trying to somehow fill that deepest hole in our life that is troubling us, to somehow feel good for a moment, to somehow live in denial of our deepest pain. But Jesus wants to reach down and expose it for what it is, not to make us feel condemned, but to allow us to be healed.

Of course when he takes this woman to this incredible place, telling her, "Go, call your husband," her reaction, much like mine or yours might be in such a situation, is to change the subject. She says, "You're obviously a prophet. I don't know how, but you know all about me." And then she starts talking about the differences in worship between Samaritans and Jews. I don't think she's exploring theology, I think she's trying to get him off on a tangent. She compliments him and says, "You're obviously someone special. You've got great insight. So let's talk about worship."

In the Samaritans' branch of Judaism they tended to focus on only the first five books of the Old Testament and to disregard the rest. And they had set up their own sites of worship, although this was in violation of God's direct command. So she says, "Our fathers worshiped on this

mountain....” She goes all the way back to the time of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, claiming common ancestry with the Jews. The Jews venerated Jacob’s well because of its history, so she appeals to that in a kind of defense of the Samaritan practices. But Jesus will have none of that, and he starts to talk about the fact that the Samaritans don’t even know what they’re doing, and the Jews are the ones who are on the right track; God has given them the full Torah, and they have the true place of worship at this time. Jesus takes a step or two with her down that road, but then turns the conversation right back to what’s important.

Connecting with the living God

“There is coming a time when none of this is going to matter,” he says. “It won’t matter if you’re in Samaria or Jerusalem or somewhere else, because true worship is about worshiping in spirit.” He takes her to the next step: how to satisfy her thirst. The satisfaction of our thirst begins with true worship. True worship is a spiritual exercise, it’s not about location or rites or accouterments. It’s about connecting to God, who is Spirit. So true worshipers will worship him “in spirit and truth.”

This is a phrase that has been much debated. What does it mean to worship in spirit and truth? I believe Jesus is talking about worship that comes from the Holy Spirit, rather than from the human spirit. True worship is informed by God’s truth, in which the Holy Spirit is certainly involved, and is energized by the Holy Spirit. True worship is connecting with the living God, who is Spirit. This living water that Jesus is offering to the Samaritan woman, the Holy Spirit, will bring her in spirit to a place of true worship, union with the living God, that will satisfy her thirst.

She says in response, “I know that Messiah [the anointed One whom God has promised] is going to come, and he is going to explain everything to us.”

Jesus takes her one step farther. In perhaps the most critical statement in this whole story, Jesus says, “I who speak to you am he.” Literally his statement is, “I am the one who is speaking to you,” or “The one who is speaking to you I am.” As a Samaritan who is rooted in the teaching of the first five books of the Old Testament, this woman’s mind would immediately jump to the statement given by Jehovah God to Moses at the burning bush, when Moses asked him by what name he should identify him to the Israelites. God said, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:13-14.) “I AM,” or *Yahweh*, is the personal name of the covenant God. This man standing before her, who has just revealed to her that he knows everything about her, looks her in the eye and says, “I AM.”

John tells story after story of Jesus’ using that phrase “I AM.” When challenged by the Pharisees, Jesus says to their faces, “Before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8:58.) He links certain descriptive words to that statement: “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35). “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). Jesus takes for himself the personal name of God. And this is perhaps the first time that he does it, to a lowly woman of ill repute in Samaria, of all places.

Now as if on cue, the disciples show up, and the woman drops her water jar and takes off. Apparently in joyous and grateful response, she goes to tell people about this encounter with Jesus, and she uses the most famous evangelistic phrase ever written down: “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did.”

Think about it. Tomorrow when you go to your office, if you should get a chance to share the gospel with the person in the cubicle next to you, are you likely to start out with the line, “I want to tell you about a person who told me everything I ever did”? Isn’t that the oddest opening for sharing the gospel you’ve ever heard? And yet that’s exactly what she says. She repeats it later. The townspeople too make reference to this testimony of hers in their own confession of faith.

What’s going on here? That phrase makes no sense, unless what is at the heart of it is the same thing we saw in the last message (Discovery Paper 8208), in which Judy Herminghaus beautifully shared the story of Hagar. She pointed out that Hagar was the only person in the Bible who ever gave God a name, when he met her in her place of desperation: “The God who sees me” (Genesis 16:13). This woman who has spent her life looking for love in relationship after relationship has just been in the presence of a man who knows everything about her—every flaw, every sin, every weakness—and yet does not condemn her. She feels loved. She sees mercy, not condemnation. She is fully known. The God who sees, who was present with Hagar, is now present with this Samaritan woman, and her heart is filled with joy and gratitude. So she heads to town telling everyone she meets, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be Messiah?”

To me, the story takes a turn of comic relief when the disciples show up. They’re like bumbling keystone cops. They come back from having gone to town, and first of all they’re appalled that Jesus is talking to a Samaritan woman, but none of them has the guts to say anything to him. After the woman takes off, they approach him and urge him to eat something. Jesus tells them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.” They say to each other, surprised, “Could someone have brought him food?”

But what Jesus does now is help them to see God’s agenda.

Seeing people with eyes of compassion

Imagine the disciples in our setting. They need to get from the Bay Area to Los Angeles. They’re not going down the Pacific Coast Highway, or Highway 101, they’re headed down I-5, right through the San Joaquin Valley, because they’ve got to get to Los Angeles as fast as they can. At some point they pull off at a rest stop because they need to grab some burgers and gas up the car. They’re back in the car, ready to get on the road, and they can’t figure out why Jesus is wasting time talking to some lowlife.

You see, the disciples are headed to Galilee, and that’s where most of them are from, so they’re headed home. Galilee is also the next stop in their ministry, the next thing on their agenda. They’re excited to get there! So they can’t figure out why Jesus is stopping to talk to this woman.

How many times are you and I like that? Our lives are ordered around agendas. Now I understand that of course in your work you've got a lot of responsibilities. You can't spend your time just talking to people. But so much of our lives is ordered toward getting to some goal, checking things off the to-do list, full speed ahead, conquering the mountain! But all around us there are people.

Jesus says to the disciples, "Do you think ministry is in Galilee? Stop and look around you. The fields are ripe for the harvest right here in Samaria! You could reap this harvest yourselves, even though you didn't plant the crop, if you were tuned in to it." He moves the disciples away from their own conceptions of what his agenda ought to be, and lines them up with God's agenda, which is loving and caring for people. That's what it's about at the end of the day.

So Jesus stays two more days. That has to drive Peter crazy, don't you think? And Judas the treasurer, who's always calculating the economics of what's going on with the group—don't you think it would just drive him nuts? They're going to stay in Samaria, of all places, two whole days! Why?

It's just to love people, to teach them about what true worship is and who the Messiah is, because he cares about these people. "My food," Jesus says, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." Jesus wants the disciples to understand that this is his agenda, to minister to people like this Samaritan woman who is so thirsty she doesn't even know what she needs, to help her see it and walk her to the only place where she can get the living water that will slake her thirst once and for all, Jesus himself. His agenda is to help her to be a true worshiper of God, so he reaches out and touches her life. That's what it's all about.

To this Samaritan woman, the greatest way she can think of to express this is the simple words, "He told me everything I ever did." You know that God knows every single thing going on in your heart. We spend so much energy covering up, don't we? It's been true right from the Garden, when Adam and Eve knew they'd sinned and covered themselves up physically (Genesis 3), which was just a metaphor for covering up their inner life. You and I have lived our whole lives honing the skill of covering up. But Jesus says to us today, "I'm going to tell you everything you ever did, because I know it—not to condemn you, but to love you and set you free."

God calls us to be men and women who hear the voice of Jesus speaking deeply into our lives, and who will then look at others with that same kind of love and compassion, so that they may come to know the saving love of Christ.

Take a moment to think about the deepest point of pain or need in your life, something that you've hidden from every other person, and recognize today that God sees it, knows it, names it, and loves you anyway, and in fact, he wants to set you free from it, so that you can have that wellspring of living water in your life. Then think about the people around you whom God might be calling you to view with compassion, to not hurry on your way intent on your agenda, but to love them completely, to see them through Jesus' eyes.

Notes

1. Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, © 2005, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 91.

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[Back to Index page](#)

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