



**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent – March 15, 2020**  
**Safe Harbour Lutheran Church - Pastor Ron Hodel**

Before I begin, I need to make something clear to you. This is a sermon about justification. Justification talks about being declared right in God's eyes. This sermon is about how big God's forgiveness in Christ is for you. It's not a sermon about sanctification - it's not a sermon about Godly living - so if you're expecting a perfectly sanctified woman at the well at the end of the story, you're not going to get that. I do believe that when we are called by the Gospel, gathered together as His people as a part of Christ's bride, the church and enlightened with God's gift of Himself in Word and Sacrament, the Holy Spirit of God sanctifies us . . . and so I have no doubt the Holy Spirit worked in the woman at the well. It's just that we're not told how this woman's life changed . . . we get an inkling, but not a clear word, and so we'd best not talk about it. With that caveat, let's begin.

Jesus should have known better. He knows His Bible. He knows what happens when Israelite men hang around wells - especially this well. After all, Father Abraham found a wife for his son, Isaac at a well, and so did his son, Jacob fall head over heels in love with his beloved Rachel, at a well (as well) - and chances are, that happened at this very well. If you recall, Moses found his wife at a well, and now, Jesus is sitting, by a well, all alone. You just know something's going to happen.

It's the hottest time of the day . . . a pretty safe time for Jesus to be alone. You see, people come to wells early in the morning or late in the afternoon in order to beat the heat of the day as they carry their heavy jars of water back and forth between well and home. So imagine a woman, coming to the well at the hottest time of the day, to fill up her water jug and hike it back to town. But if you know a bit about this lady, it makes a lot of sense. She comes to the well when no one else is going to be there because she doesn't want anyone else to be there. She doesn't want other people around. She has a deep shame that haunts her, a terrible disgrace that just will not go away. She has an unholy horror she carries around with her wherever she goes - an embarrassment brought to light every time she sees her neighbor stare at her with disgust in their eyes. She hates all the names people call her. "Slut," "whore," "shack up honey," "loose woman," "a real piece of work." And so to keep from hearing them, she goes to the well in the heat of the day when no one is around. The heat is much more bearable than the jokes and the stares and the shame and the wagging fingers and the cat calls.

You know how it is in the Middle East. But even before sharia law and burqas, men and women in this part of the world didn't just come right out and talk to each other. And the same held true with Jews and Samaritans. Jews considered Samaritans, well, you know, not really Jews at all. An unholy blend of Jew and whatever other races the Assyrians brought into northern Israel in order to mix the genetics up back in 722 BC. True-blood Jews and green blooded Samaritans seriously disliked each other. So much so, that if a good Jew wanted to walk from Judea in the south to Galilee in the

north, to stay unsoiled, he'd cross the Jordan and walk north on the other side . . . just to keep from touching filthy Samaritan soil. So, it's safe to assume that Jesus wouldn't talk to this woman and this woman wouldn't talk to Jesus.

But she's out of luck. Jesus'll talk to anyone. He asks her for a drink. And the conversation leads to living water that wells up to eternal life. And that gets her attention and so the woman says to him, **Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.**

Then, out of the blue, Jesus turns the page on her and asks about her husband. And this is the great big shame she's carrying around - for she's had five husbands and the guy she's sleeping with now, she's not married to. She does her best to deflect the question, but she's plum out of luck. You can pull the wool over a lot of people's eyes but she's speaking with the One to whom all hearts are open, and from whom no secrets are hid. She doesn't tell Him. He tells her . . . Like a so-called psychic, He lays her life right out in front of her - and that makes her really uncomfortable. So, she tries to change the subject to something they're sure to fight about - the Messiah - and hopefully, she thinks, that will keep them from ever talking again. **I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.** But again, she's plum out of luck. Jesus loves talking about the Messiah. **Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He."** This poor woman can't win for losing.

It's not part of our reading for today, but after Jesus says this, His disciples, who'd been off buying food, show up . . . and there's a little conversation about the improprieties of talking to loose women at wells. And then, after that, the woman leaves her water jar and goes away.

Why would she forget her water jug? Have you ever been so engrossed by something you've forgotten where your keys are or what you were going to say or something like that? It's almost as if her water jug and its water lose their importance. Something's changed. Now, before I go on, what do you want to see changed in the life of this adulterous woman? Adultery? Do you want to see her clean up her life and start flying straight? Do you want to see change in her life?

Whatever it is that you want to see changed, one thing that IS changed is the fact that her burden seems to have been lifted from her. All that stuff that was weighing her down - her sin, her secrecy, her distress, even her water jar - it's like she leaves it all behind. It's like she leaves it with Jesus. And she goes back into town telling everyone she'd been hiding from, **Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?** Her situation hasn't changed - so how can it be that this terrible burden has been lifted from her?

Instead of sneaking around hiding from people, she's now announcing to everyone who'll listen that she is what she is . . . a sinner . . . but now, it's like she's found some freedom from all the condemnation. It's as if **there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.** I think St. Paul said that. (Romans 8:1) It's as if she believes that and, now, for the first time in her life, she's found a freedom that she's never had. And because of her witness, folks in Sychar went out to where Jesus was and **many Samaritans from that town believed in [Jesus] because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did."** So far the non-offensive part of the story. Now I'm going to offend you - or the Gospel is!

The great joy of Jesus' outrageous good news sends this woman running through town telling everyone that the Savior of the world had come. But what we want to know, is, how does this story end? *Okay, she believes in Jesus and all, I get it. But let's get to the important part. Does she clean up her act and start flying straight? Does she fix the "problems" in her life? Does she tell the guy she's sleeping with, "No more shacking up until I get a ring and a date?" What does she do now? How do you want the story to end? Does she find a one room apartment out on the East End and take a job at Cost U Less - that'd be a drive!? Or does she continue shacking up with the man who's not her husband? We're not told, are we! And answer me this - If the woman doesn't move out of her boyfriend's house, will Jesus save her? And what will happen if the woman continues to live with this man? Will Jesus take back the living water He gave her?*

Now let's bring the story to you (and me, of course.)

Which would you rather have:

- Do you want assurance that this Samaritan woman is going to stop living with her boyfriend?
- Or do you want the assurance that the Samaritan woman has the joy of knowing that whether or not she gets her life all straightened out, God's grace and Jesus' forgiveness is hers, regardless?

Now, before you say, *Pastor! You can't be encouraging her in her sin.* I know. Scripture is clear. **Are we to continue in sin that grace may about? By no means!** Besides, I've been around long enough to see how these relationships often end in tragic train wrecks. I'm saying it this way to make you think.

And my point is this: Jesus came to die for her sins, not to coach her into living better or obeying more. Jesus didn't come to teach behavior modification. He came to give her life and the joy of salvation.

Without condoning anything – understand this. This woman is between a rock and a hard place - and this isn't just before Jesus talked to her - it's after, too. She has no control over her marital status. She's had five husbands. We don't know if some of them had died while they were married. We don't know if there were divorces in her past. But in her world as a woman, she had no say in any of that. And unlike today, rarely did women work outside the home. So she had no 'upstanding' means of supporting herself. She couldn't have gotten a job at Cost U Less. And she doesn't seem to have had an extended family, because if she had, she probably would have moved in with them. She was used by men, and by now, she was all used up. No one wanted her for a wife, so she had two options. She could live on the streets and prostitute herself to death there, or, she could continue living with her boyfriend.

Sin or death - those were her choices. She was between a rock and a hard place - even after her encounter with Jesus. She has no options. She's helpless, and hopeless - and she's just the sort of person Jesus is looking for. A person with nothing to offer Jesus, but her sin. A person who can only be given to. A person who could have sung, *Nothing in my hands I bring . . . but my sin. Simply to Thy cross I cling.*

What will Jesus do? He's got a six time loser on his hands. What's He going to do if she runs off with yet another man? Let's make it seven or even seventy times seven. If her sin increases what will Jesus do? The Apostle Paul tells us. **Where sin increased grace increased all the more.** Paul's point. Not to justify sin but to display the incredible value of Jesus' death - and the fact that it's infinite - which is terribly good news for us. There's a real cap on just how much money you can borrow. But there's no cap on the amount of evil that Jesus' blood will cover. It pays for all sin, even repeated sin.

We act as though we've got options. We can either choose to sin or choose not to sin. If you demand that the story ends with the woman cleaning up her act, then you'd better go home and do the same. End your sins. All of them . . . even that one you think no one knows about. End it. The point is we can't stop, we won't, and if we're honest, we don't even want to stop . . . at least some of them . . . at least our favorite sins. That's what Scripture means when it says we are slaves to sin. Slaves have no choice in who their masters are. Slaves don't have the power, nor the authority to free themselves. Freedom has to come from outside of the slave. Someone has to free them or buy them. The apostle Paul, if you will allow me to say it this way, "cleaned up his life" and did far greater things for the kingdom of God than any of us ever will but still he cried, **The good that I want to do I do not do - and the evil that I do not want to do, - that is what I keep on doing. Who will save me from this body of death?** And he said that as a Christian. Jesus saves us, without any help from us. That's what "by grace alone" means.

So, does Jesus make the woman aware of her sins? Of course He does. Does Jesus condone this woman's lifestyle? Certainly not. Does Jesus demand that she fix her train wreck of a life before He gives Her living water? No He doesn't. **While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** (Romans 5:6,8)

The hard part of this story is accepting the fact that we are just like the Samaritan woman. We are like her in that we are absolutely helpless to be good people. Oh, perhaps we commit 'lesser' sins - so to speak, sins that aren't so public, sins that aren't so obvious. But that just means, *our sins are easier to deny*. When they're "little sins," we write them off, we call them "little white lies", "mistakes everyone makes", "everyone's doing it." But when your sins are known all around town, you can't deny them. And for the woman at the well, there was no denying it. It's hard to be inconspicuous when you're known as the town "you know what." It's pretty obvious what's going on when you live in a man's house and he's not your husband. So maybe she had an advantage. She didn't seem to have too much trouble as she openly confessed **Jesus is the man who told me all that I ever did**. She didn't try to justify herself. She didn't try to make excuses. She didn't say, *Everyone's doing it, what's the big deal*. And if she'd wanted to bring up excuses, she was a woman between sin and death and her excuses would have been a lot better than any excuses I, for one, could come up with. Dare I say most of our sins are for convenience sake. She simply accepted it - the fact that she was a sinner. Jesus brought it to her attention and by declaring His Law, He repented her and she repented of it.

Jesus does the same for each of us here in church today. We don't come to God, He comes to us. He has to - we're slaves. And just like the woman at the well, Jesus won't leave us alone either. We showed up at the well this morning, sang "In Christ Alone" and we were met by Jesus in His Word bringing to light everything we have ever done. And just as the woman at the well did - we confessed our sins - together we said, *God, you're right about me, I'm a sinner*. And Jesus gives us His gifts. **Living water welling up to eternal life**. Unconditional love, forgiveness, and heaven itself in the absolution. Just like this woman at the well, we too have met God's Messiah face to face, someone who knows everything we've ever done, and He loves us anyway. And what hits us is what hit the woman before us. **There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus** . . . not because we have cleaned ourselves up so well that there's nothing to condemn, but because the burden of our sins have been lifted by the One lifted up.

Jesus didn't tell this woman, *Be good now. You owe me. I'm watching you*. He simply set her free to do **whatever** she desired. And what was the first thing she desired? That, we're told. Her desire was to tell others. Instantly she became a great evangelist. That's not something she did. That was the power of God at work in her. The great news in that is, God uses the unusable. Who on earth could have seen her as a voice of God proclaiming the coming of the holy One of Israel? But that's what she did . . . that's what God's Holy Spirit worked in her. No doubt the Holy Spirit worked other good and godly things as well. What they were, we're not told. But in this we see that God uses the unusable and that's pretty good news for most of us rather unusable types.

It's just that simple.

- She was forgiven. From the very top. And so are you.
- She heard it from the highest source. And so have you. Not from me. But from your Jesus who comes to you in His Word.
- Jesus says you're a sinner and we say, *You're right*. That's repentance.
- Jesus says I'm your Savior and we say, *You're right*. That's faith.