

March 19, 2017

TEXT: John 4:27–42

TITLE: Unfaithful Phrases: I Can't Make a Difference

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Here's the problem: I want to talk about the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well but the scripture doesn't give me much to go on. Jesus and his disciples are heading north out of Judea. About halfway through the region of Samaria, they are hot and hungry, so Jesus sits by a well while the disciples go off to buy some food. Verse 7 says: *A Samaritan woman came to draw water and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.'* No name for the woman, no hint at her age, no description of her clothes or demeanor—nothing. It's about as bland an entry as could ever be written - almost as if she were made of cellophane, invisible. You could look right through her, walk right by her and never know she's there.

Now, I want to walk a fine line here. We are going to talk about the Samaritan woman as an outsider—as someone people walk past, taking no notice of her. But this isn't a sermon about "them," about outsiders we pass on the streets. It's also a sermon about "us," about the ways we feel unimportant, overlooked, left out and disempowered. So as I talk about the Samaritan woman, picture yourself standing right beside her, next in line to draw water from that well long ago. OK?

Vs. 7: A Samaritan woman came to draw water. We never learn this woman's name. That's important because a name means you exist in relationship—someone named you—others can call you and you'll answer. Yet without a name, without any companions beside her, plus the fact that she came to the well during the heat of the day, means this woman is fundamentally alone. Also, she didn't initiate the conversation with Jesus. She likely hoped to avoid interacting with him. Sadly, a single woman is always vulnerable in male-dominated societies. She likely kept her head down, her eyes averted, and just wanted to get some water in her jar and lug it back home out of the midday sun.

The anonymity of this woman makes her an unlikely candidate for a leading role in the bible. But remember this: No one starts out as an outsider. Someone else has to confer that negative title on them. Someone else has to tell them that they aren't worthy, they aren't welcome, they aren't needed. No one starts out telling themselves, "I can't make a difference." Someone else has to say to them, "You can't make a difference" and they have to take that pronouncement to heart.

In his book *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates reminds us that hate gives identity. We say out loud pejorative words for African-Americans, for homosexuals, for women, for immigrants and doing so serves to illuminate the borders around us, illuminate what we ostensibly are not. Coates says, "We name the hated strangers and are thus confirmed in [our] tribe."¹ Even Rodgers and Hammerstein's old musical *South Pacific* knew this was true: *You've got to*

be taught before it's too late, before you are six or seven or eight, to hate all the people your relatives hate, you've got to be carefully taught.

I recently read of a 2012 study published in the Stanford Law Review that involved playing a 3 minute video of protesters being dispersed by police and then asking the viewers whether the protesters were peaceful or violent. Some viewers were told that the protesters were anti-abortion activists outside an abortion clinic; others were told that the protesters were outside an army recruitment office challenging the military's anti-gay policies. Even though all saw the exact same video, the liberals felt the anti-abortion protesters were violent while the conservatives felt these protesters acted within their rights, and conversely, the conservatives perceived the protesters for gay rights as acting violently while the liberals believed they were acting peaceably. All perceptions are shaped by personal beliefs.² That is true when we look at others; that remains true when we look in the mirror.

We tell ourselves "I can't make a difference", which was likely preceded by someone saying to us "You can't make a difference." When repeated over and over, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of despair. It's like Dante's inscription over the gates of hell: *Abandon hope all ye who enter here*. So how do we break this cycle? The short answer is this: You set down the jar and you listen. But stay with me as I want to give you the long answer as well.

The election of Donald Trump has been deeply troubling. It brought to light deep divisions that exist in American society and has reinforced a narrative that we no longer share common values in our nation. We are now red states—blue states; Allegheny County—Butler County. Facebook friends are now unfriended; family relationships are now strained if not severed. After the election, I contacted a friend of mine who pastors a church outside Zelienople. In the spirit of Lenten confession, I will note that I would likely not have contacted my friend if Hillary Clinton had won—to see how he and his congregation were doing after a Republican presidential defeat. That is my flawed perception—my liberal bias—and I regret it. Anyway, I called Graham and asked if his Session and our Session could meet, share a meal, and talk about the recent election. I don't know if Allegheny folk talking with Butler County folk will ultimately make a difference in our troubled land. But our Session agreed that the first step is to meet and listen to one another, not to allow stereotypes and flawed perceptions shape how we thought about fellow Presbyterians who voted differently than we did. So this Thursday, a part of our Session will drive to Zelienople and break bread with the Session of Calvin Presbyterian Church. Please pray for this event.

If the voice in your head says "I can't make a difference," I could counter that by pointing to the Samaritan woman at the well—the one who went back to her village and told them about this Jesus and how through her witness, scores of people became followers of this one we call the Christ. I could name others in the bible who were small in the eyes of the world, but great in the eyes of God: little

David standing before the giant Goliath; the boy whose offer of a few loaves and fish led to a miraculous feeding of 5000 people; the grieving women who became the first witnesses of the Easter resurrection and first apostles of the gospel; the rough fisherman Peter who became the powerful preacher of Pentecost. And while all those things are true, they aren't the whole truth. My job is not to be a Christian self-help book you take off the shelf at Barnes & Noble, glibly proclaiming "You can make a difference" by sharing with you perky inspirational vignettes. No, my job is to get you to stand beside the Samaritan woman at the well long enough so that you'll set down your jar and receive living water.

Verse 7: A Samaritan woman came to draw water and Jesus said to her, "Give me something to drink." Who breaks the silence? Jesus does. Jesus shatters the taboo, the social norm, the lingering prejudices—Jew/Samaritan, male/female, white/black, gay/straight, young/old, Republican/Democrat, whatever name we've given to what divides us. God initiates. God in Christ takes the first step. God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit moves toward us—wherever we may be, whatever we may be telling ourselves, however we feel. God initiates and does so out of love. As theologian Paul Tillich said, *Accept that you are accepted.*

When Jesus first spoke, the Samaritan woman's initial reaction was defensive and questioning: *How can you ask me for water? Jews and Samaritans don't do that sort of thing. Stay back.* Again Jesus broke the silence, crossed the line, and initiated healing. *Verse 10: If you knew who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would ask and he would give you living water.* Living water—don't dismiss that phrase as just a quaint religious metaphor. The living water is the Spirit, the *logos*, the presence of the risen Christ moving in our lives to open our eyes to the ways of God. Living water is Christ's church and sacraments and prayer and inspiration. It is becoming more than we ever imagined and more than we surely deserved. It is what takes our humble offerings, our daily good deeds and well-meaning acts of compassion and turns them into events that change lives. That save souls. That truly make a difference. *With living water, with God all things are possible (Mt 19:26).*

Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman and changed her world. He broke into her place of otherness, prejudice and despair and gave her living water and hope. At that moment she consciously left her jar behind. It wasn't needed then. It was heavy and awkward; it would only slow her down. More importantly, if she carried it back into the village, the people wouldn't have truly seen her. She would still have been overlooked, Mrs. Cellophane, the outsider, the one on the margins lugging water in a jar. So she left all that behind. Now she demanded to be heard and seen, and her language was peppered with imperatives: *Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! Can he be the Messiah?*

That's the long answer. So remember the short answer: If you think you can't make a difference, you're wrong. Set down your jar and listen. Who is crossing boundaries to speak to you—or for whom do you need to cross a line in order to

Speak with them? Where is the Spirit leading you to act, to pray, to care? How is the living water being poured into your soul right now? Put down whatever is in your hands, whatever is holding you back. Accept you are accepted. Then go—speak—and make a difference.

¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me, p. 60.

² Lisa Feldman Barrett, "The Law's Emotion Problem", *New York Times*, March 12, 2017; citing *Stanford Law Review* "Cognitive Illiberalism", Vol. 64:851.