

Melva's Corner

ROAD TO RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS

Part III

October 2, 2006

(John 1:28-29)

Central Truth: By asking for a cup of water, Jesus was saying, “I don’t feel the way others do. Your race, your religion, your gender, your past-these don’t matter to me. You are a person. You mean something to me.

Three weeks ago, we introduced the plan to learn how to treat people more appropriately. And that plan is really simple. We’re going to let Jesus be our coach. We started with Jesus and the Samaritan Woman. Let’s continue our discussion this week (**John 4:1-29 NLT**)

Carl Sandberg told of frequent stands that Abraham Lincoln took against racial prejudice. One particularly stirring drama unfolded on the night of Lincoln’s second inauguration ball. He had just delivered the blazing address in which he made famous the words, “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work that we are in.”

That evening, in a White House reception room, Lincoln stood shaking hands with a long line of well-wishers. Someone informed him that Frederick Douglass was at the door, but security wouldn’t let him in because he was black.

Lincoln broke off from high-level protocol and had Douglass shown in at once. The crowd of guests hushed as the great leader appeared at the door. In a booming voice that filled the silence, Lincoln unashamedly announced, “Here comes my friend Douglass!” And then turning to Douglass, Lincoln said, “I am glad to see you. I saw you in the crowd today, listening to my address.

There is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours. I want to know what you think of it.”

Those who see and respect the rich human qualities in individuals whom others reject blaze pioneer trails through thick jungles of bigotry. The next generation can walk on the path of such giants. What further delays might have impeded race relations in this country without Lincoln’s heart and courage? This is Jesus’ style as well.

God in the flesh was not only available to a woman like the Samaritan; He was also sensitive to her. He read the signs that told the story of her troubled life. I don’t know how Jesus picked up on all the distress signals, other than He was God incarnate. Maybe He’d already heard gossip, or maybe there was some subtle, indescribable something about her that spoke to Him of sadness. Who knows? But somehow He realized that life had sent her little kindness. Perhaps John included this story in his Gospel because few could feel any more unwanted than this woman.

Jesus was sensitive, not only to her hopelessness, but also to the great chasm between them. He, a man. She, a woman. He, a Jew. She, a Samaritan. What do you suppose went through her mind as she walked past the man who sat on the well watching her- a Jew who actually opened his mouth to speak to her: “Could you give me a drink of water?” Was she startled, then shocked, then suspicious? Whatever she felt, Jesus most definitely had a hostile person on His hands! She was probably hostile toward men in general, but certainly toward this man, a Jew.

Race lines in Belfast, Kosovo, and the Middle East could scarcely be more tautly drawn than those ancient lines between Jews and Samaritans.

It all began centuries earlier, when the Assyrians carried the northern tribes of Judah into captivity. The Jews had betrayed their heritage by intermarrying with the Assyrians, thus diluting their bloodline and creating a so called “mongrel race” called the Samaritans. Their religion became contaminated too. By the time the Samaritans returned to their homeland, their views of God were greatly garbled.

By contrast, when the southern Hebrew tribes were carried off into captivity, they stubbornly resisted the Babylonian culture. They returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, proud that they had compromised neither convictions nor culture. They would remind the Samaritans of the southern superiority at the drop of a skullcap. Even when the Samaritans offered to help rebuild the Jerusalem Temple, the southern Jews vehemently rejected their assistance, and more bricks were set into the wall of prejudice and resentment between Jews and Samaritans. So the Samaritans built their own temple; but in 129 B.C. a Jewish general destroyed it, a slap to Samaritan dignity that stung for centuries. Meanwhile, Jewish bigotry only deepened. So the woman who faced Jesus that day belonged to an unwanted heritage.

This woman also belonged to an unwanted gender: female. In the ancient Middle East, men did not reward femininity with special courtesies and chivalry. In fact, they systematically degraded woman. Some men wouldn't speak to women in public, not even their own wives or daughters. A few were so fanatical that they would literally close their eyes when passing a woman in the street. These were nicknamed the "bruised and bleeding rabbis" because they often collided with walls and trees while their eyes were closed.

As if it wasn't enough that our water-bucket lady was from a throw-away culture and a throw-away sex, this Samaritan woman also seemed unwanted by her own people. Having gone through five husbands, she was now living with a "lover." Her history of rootless romances draped over her like a sandwich sign, advertising to all that she was a social leper, not welcome at the morning well with proper people. She was a reject, shoved to the edge of humanity, a target of cruel jokes and lustful men. Doubtless, she could see nothing ahead but the empty drudgery of the water buckets and "wifely" bed of a man who wasn't even her husband. Yet way down inside of her, she had not stopped wishing that somewhere, sometime, some way, God would touch His people — that He would touch her!

Because of social constraints, it was risky to help such people. No one would have blamed Jesus if He had pulled His robe over His face and ignored her. After all, He was tired. The disciples were gone, so who would have known? Besides, if He taught her

anything, she probably wouldn't have the brains to grasp it or the spiritual framework to retain it. And even if she did, she had no credibility to influence other people with His message.

But our Master saw a person who mattered to God. As weary as He was, He quickly sensed a wounded soul badly in need of bandages, and He gently moved her into a nonthreatening conversation. But since He was talking to an outsider, He knew He would need to be unusually creative.

He saw a person precious to God, a stooped and beaten woman with an authentic heart, and He offered her a fragment of acceptance. By asking for a cup of water, Jesus was saying, "I don't feel the way others do. Your race, your religion, your gender, your past-these don't matter to me. You are a person. You mean something to me. In fact, I need your help! Could you give me a drink of water?" This account doesn't imply the emotional brutality that many suggest. Skip down to the result of Jesus' conversation. We find this stirring response: **"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?'" (John 4:28-29).**

Does she act like a woman who has just been caught lying about her sordid past? Just been snared in the trap of her own embarrassing failures? Why would someone who had just been humiliated by a total stranger run to praise that stranger to her family and neighbors?

And, be honest now, if this kind of woman ran up to you and said, "Guess what? I just met a guy at the well who told me every bad secret I was hiding. Come meet him so he can do the same for you." Do you think you and the whole town would rush out to the well? Not likely! Right? But John says the whole town went out to see Him.

What happened then? The key that unlocks this story is found beside the well: the water jar the Samaritan woman left behind. Somehow, I don't think she ever retrieved the thing. She had no more need to water the last dry sticks of a dead-end relationship. The empty water jar speaks eloquently. It says that Jesus stirred a slumbering hope to its feet. It declares that this wounded woman

found a joy so deep that she forgot to do what she came to do and took off to tell everyone the news, “The Messiah is here!” Instead of lugging heavy jars of tepid water to the house of a demanding human sponge, she piped in living water to all the hearts of a grateful, thirsty village.

Scriptural References:

‘Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?’” (John 4:29).