

“He Had to Go”

“Now he had to go through Samaria” (John 4:4).

Have you ever been an outcast? Have you ever felt like you didn't fit in or that for some reason you have been cut off from the rest of the group? Maybe the simple fact of your gender or the color of your skin created an unspoken barrier that marked you as an outsider. Or maybe it was because of something that you said or did – an unresolved offense creating a divide that seemed impossible to repair. No matter what the cause, whether it was careless sin on your part, an ignorant prejudice, or even the blatant cruelty of another, the sting and shame of isolation is an experience that no one ever forgets.

Well, in today's Gospel reading, we find the story of such a person. John's account seems to start simply enough. He tells us that it was about “the sixth hour” (which, by Jewish reckoning, would've meant that it was right around noon). The sun was high in sky and the temperature was rising. Jesus was tired after walking all morning and so He did what any of us might have done. He went to the town well to get a drink. And this is where the story gets interesting. John writes that as Jesus sat there by the well, baking in the afternoon sun, “a Samaritan woman came to draw water” (John 4:7). Now this may seem like an insignificant detail, but on many levels, this was a problem.

The woman who approached Jesus at Jacob's well was an outcast and one of the reasons for her outsider status was something about herself that she couldn't have helped if she wanted to. You see, this woman was a Samaritan and, by virtue of her birth, she was considered impure and unclean by Jewish culture. This long-standing Jewish hatred of the Samaritans had existed for more than seven centuries. It started when the Assyrians conquered and occupied the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. Once the Assyrian army had captured Samaria, which was the capital of the Northern Kingdom, they deported all the Israelites who had any special skills or talents and they settled the land with foreigners. These imported pagans then intermarried with the surviving Israelites and what resulted was a religion and culture that mixed Jewish worship practices with the idolatry of the Assyrians. When the Jews returned from their captivity, these “Samaritans” made an attempt to join them, but, with their mixed race and hybrid religion, they were utterly rejected by the Jewish establishment. Around 400 B.C. the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim and the rift between the Jews and the Samaritans was fixed forever. The Samaritan woman who joined Jesus at the well was a descendant from these unclean people and there was nothing she could do to change that fact.

Now, not only was this woman a Samaritan, but she was also a public sinner. Even before Jesus revealed the facts of her adulterous life, the details of this reading tell us that this woman was a pariah – an outcast even in her own village. John is careful to mention the hour of the day at which this meeting took place because this information tells us something about the woman and her relationship to the community. You see, unless there was some kind of emergency, people didn't come to draw water at twelve o'clock in the afternoon. It was simply too hot and it was right in the middle of their work day. People drew their water in the morning or in the evening and, since there is no sign of crisis in this text, it's safe to assume that this woman was there for another reason.

To come to the well with the others at the beginning or end of the day, meant that she would once again have to endure the cruel stares and harsh words from the villagers. She would face their biting ridicule and she would be reminded once again of her ruined relationships, as childhood friends, and even her own family members, shunned this sinful woman. In going to the well at the normal times, she would have been forced to deal with the fact that she had been rejected from the group and that she was an outsider even among her own people.

Maybe you can identify with this woman. Has there ever been a time in your life when you were isolated and cut off from the group? Perhaps you've experienced the same kind of pain as the woman in today's reading and maybe you've even felt it in the church. I've talked with many people who have been abandoned and ostracized by the church as they've worked through a sin or crisis that played itself out in a public way. Unfortunately... and shamefully... and sinfully, we are all guilty of this type of betrayal. We have all walked away from people in their time of need. We have all stood silently by as some poor soul struggled alone at well. And we have all abandoned people in their sin. But that is not what Jesus did.

This story from the well shows us that Jesus pursues those who are rejected by others. This story from the well shows us that Jesus came precisely to meet the outcasts and to reach out to those abandoned by the world or even by the church. And, in this story from the well, we see that Jesus chooses to deal with the outsider.

Today's text officially begins with verse five, but one of the most important parts of this story is actually found in verse four. Here, John writes, "Now Jesus *had* to go through Samaria" (John 4:4). After celebrating the Passover in Jerusalem, and following the midnight meeting with Nicodemus, Jesus and His disciples had been staying in the Judean countryside. We learn, in the beginning of chapter four, that to avoid unwanted attention from the Pharisees, Jesus and the disciples were heading back to Galilee and it's here that John writes, "Now Jesus had to go through Samaria." On the surface this seems like nothing more than a description of the route Jesus and the disciples would take as they moved north, but there's more to these words than a simple geographic marker. You see, "good Jews" did everything they could to avoid going through Samaria. This was not the normal route from Judea to Galilee and it was certainly not a path they "had" to take. But these words are a proclamation of Jesus' mission and they tell us that the path that Jesus took through Samaria was a purposeful part of His plan.

This fact is further supported by John's note in verse eight that, "His disciples had gone into the town to buy food" (John 4:8). It doesn't take twelve people to buy lunch and, in a town that would've been hostile to Jewish pilgrims, the disciples wouldn't have just left their rabbi to fend for Himself – that is not unless Jesus told them to. Imagine if they had stayed with Jesus. The presence of 13 Jewish men gathered around Jacob's well would have been more than intimidating to the woman Jesus intended to meet and, even if she would've been bold enough to cut through the crowd of Jews, the disciples would have never allowed such an illicit conversation. But instead, Jesus made sure that He was alone and, with just one man alone at well, the woman approached to draw her water...and what happened next changed her life forever.

First, Jesus ignored the social mores of the day by speaking to a woman. He disregarded the religious tradition and prejudice of the day by asking for a drink from the jar of an unclean Samaritan. And, in this gesture, Jesus entered into fellowship with a sinful Samaritan woman. He went where no one else would go. He knowingly, willingly, intentionally and shockingly chose to create a relationship with an unworthy, unclean, outcast of a woman and He did it to bring her life.

In today's reading from Romans, Paul describes the love that God has for us in language that is equally shocking when he writes, "You see at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8).

In this story at the well, we see God's love in action. In this account from the well, we see a Savior who enters into our sinful world, who is not afraid to confront the darkness of our lives, who is not scared off by our past, and who points us to the gift of God that gives us life forever! In this story, we are shown the Christ and we are given the sure and certain word that He has come for sinners like us!

Jesus *had to go* through Samaria. He had to go because the people of Samaria needed to know. And this is a powerful lesson for us as we respond to the gift of faith. As people for whom Christ died – as people who have experienced the living water of Baptism and heard the forgiving Gospel of Jesus and received the promise of eternal life – we also *have to go*. We have to go because we are surrounded by people who need to know the Savior of the world. That is why we canvassed the neighborhood yesterday. That's we are planning for Summer of Service. That's why we'll hold another Block Party and that's why we are involved in Washington School. We have to go, because they need to know.

And every day, there are people in your life who also need to know the gift of God in Jesus. The person at work to whom everyone is afraid to speak needs to know. The widow on your street who locks herself inside to hide her grief needs to know. The kid in your school who has no friends and is constantly picked on by others needs to know. The person in church who always sits alone and who comes and goes unnoticed needs to know. The family member who has walked away from the Lord needs to know. It may not always be comfortable and we may not always be welcomed, but we have to go because people need to know that there is a God who knows everything they have ever done, who loves them no matter what and who has given Himself to bring them life. Go and share this life-giving and living water. Amen.

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