

## “Thirsting for Something More”

Neil Engle  
February 24, 2008  
Text: John 4:5-42

First Christian Church  
115 Courthouse Plaza  
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

I took the Stranger Danger quiz via the internet a few days ago. It was five questions – five pictures were shown – a woman in a wedding dress, two tough looking teenagers, a young man dressed in black, a sweet looking elderly woman, and a father and daughter at the beach. Each time one of the pictures was shown, I was asked: “Is this person a stranger?” When I identified all five as strangers, I was reminded, “You are correct.” “Just because a person looks safe or normal doesn’t mean they aren’t a stranger. A stranger is someone you don’t know.” According to McGruff’s website, “Strangers don’t look like monsters, aliens or bad guys you see on TV. They look like ordinary people.”

While these warnings are intended to help protect children from kidnappings or molestations, we adults have learned to take heed. After all, the gunman at Northern Illinois University looked normal enough. The teenager arrested in Kansas City this week for plotting the murder of his parents looked pretty harmless. “Just because a person looks safe or normal . . .” Strangers are people we don’t know. We’ve taught our children to not talk to strangers, and we’ve learned to avoid contact with people we don’t know – that applies to avoiding opening e-mails from people you don’t know, giving out your credit card information to an unknown individual, or avoiding eye contact when we’re involved in a potential road rage incident.

Now “stranger danger” is not a new phenomenon. It existed about 2000 years ago – in Samaria – in the town of Sychar. But it showed itself in a different way. It wasn’t a child fearing a child predator – it wasn’t a citizen suspicious of a criminal. No, then it was an outsider who checks out the insider, it was a man being cautious of a woman, a Jew sizing up a Samaritan, it was the fallen being avoided by the upstanding. While I appreciated our video this morning because of the woman’s expressiveness, it didn’t quite capture the unusual circumstances of this encounter. Jesus and the woman had plenty of reason to be leery of the stranger each of them faced. After all, women had no place in public life. They weren’t to be seen or heard, especially not by holy men, who didn’t even speak to their own wives in public. Not only was she a woman but she was a Samaritan – which made her a half breed and full pagan as far as Jewish purists were concerned. Jews detested Samaritans, and the feeling was mutual. And having been married five times, she was the object of the local gossip, so she didn’t dare go to the well in the morning with all the respectable women. She could’ve avoided this male Jewish stranger. He could’ve avoided this Samaritan outsider.

But you know, Jesus talks longer to the woman at the well than He does to anyone else in all the Gospels – longer than He talks to any of His disciples, longer than He talks to any of His accusers, longer than He talks to any of His own family. She is the first person He reveals Himself to in the Gospel of John. She is the first outsider to discover who He is and tells others. She is the first evangelist, John tells us, and her testimony brings many to faith. Jesus is tired. Jesus is thirsty – He sees the woman. Jesus gets her attention – she begins by raising practical concerns – Jew/Samaritan, nothing to draw water with. She asks about water – what she means by water and what Jesus means by water are poles apart. But soon, the distance between these two is narrowed by the woman’s curiosity about this man who puts himself in the category with, or rather superior to, Jacob, whose well it was and about whom many stories were told. For example, when Jacob lifted the cover from the well, bubbling-living water rose to the surface. He tells her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst, the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The Samaritan woman responds, “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.”

Envision the scene here? The woman finds herself needing to reach out for something. She’s hurting – she needs love. I believe she understands that without it, life can’t be what it ought to be. It’s as if the water she drank before now, was poison. She wants life. She is a woman in need of love and affirmation and wholeness – she comes constantly to this well and has not been satisfied.

I believe that many of us not only know this story – we know about this story. It may not be the same well, but most of us have been there, or someone close to us has. We’ve been to the well seeking meaning – affirmation – we’ve been to the well to find that which will fill the empty spot in our hearts. We thought we found it in a relationship, or with money, or substance, or alcohol, or popularity, or sex, but we left the well unsatisfied – our thirst unquenched, just like the Samaritan woman, whose life was trapped in a non-satisfying, non-fulfilling cycle of filling and emptying water jars – marrying, divorcing, and remarrying. Whether life’s rituals be religious or secular, at the altar or at the town well, or at a local bar, they are no substitute for a relationship with God. Most of us have been to the well – we know the pain we experience along the way – the pain that to some degree is the cause of our trip to the well, and also that is sometimes the result of that trip.

Pain that is born with the words: “I’m sorry, we did everything we could to save him.” Or the words, “I’m not in love with you anymore,” or “I tried to resist, but I just couldn’t help myself.” “You’re a good employee, but I’m afraid we’re going to have to let you go,” or “We’ve decided to look for another church.” Jesus knows the pain of the Samaritan woman – His heart aches for her – for the fact that she is hurting. He knows she’d been to the well five times.

It is surprising how uninterested Jesus is in details of her five former husbands and current lover. John, the author of this gospel, offers no speculation. If it were today, Dr. Phil would interview the husbands and the current live-in. Maury Povich would have the six men confront the woman. If former husbands had died, Geraldo would have a prime time special investigating the mysterious circumstances. Jesus, on the other hand, engages in no moral speculation or judgment. He knows her marital status, and doesn’t condemn her. He doesn’t condemn – rather he performs “finger therapy.” He puts his finger on the pain of this woman – not to poke or pry, but to identify – to name the pain. “You’re not looking for momentary delight but a connection where you can experience love for who you are and be supplied by the one who made you. You’re not looking for a parole, but a pardon. You want to be set free from your pain and burdens – you’re thirsty, your soul is parched. You want that spring within.” Jesus says, “Woman, drink this water and you won’t need others to make you happy. Your self worth, your sense of who you are, of acceptance, or belonging, doesn’t come from others – it comes from this living water.”

By telling the woman who she is, Jesus shows her who He is. By confirming her true identity, He reveals His own, and that is how it still happens. The Messiah is the one in whose presence you know who you really are – the good and bad of it, the all of it, the hope in it. The Messiah is the one who shows us who we are by showing us who He is – who crosses all boundaries, breaks all rules, drops all disguises – speaking to us like someone we have known all our life, bubbling up in our life like a well that needs no dipper, so that we go back to face people we thought we could never face again, speaking to them as boldly as He spoke to us. “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done.”

That statement I believe is an affirmation of her belief in Jesus Christ as the Messiah. Her question, “Can this be the Christ?” may be interrogative in form, but it’s certainly affirmative in substance. There is true joy in this woman. And I believe true joy in Jesus, too. For the disciples offer Jesus food, and He refuses, saying, “I have food to eat of which you do not know. My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work.” I believe the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman ends in joy for Him and her – and joy is what He offers us. We as Christians are and must be about joy not sorrow, hope not despair, LIFE, NOT DEATH, CREATION NOT DESTRUCTION. We must listen to our pain and learn from it, but not be a slave to it. Pain is inevitable, but misery is optional. Through finger therapy, Jesus offers us release from spiritual pain and gives us true joy. If we go to the right well – if we drink from the Son of God. If we say, “Fill my cup, Lord, I lift it up, Lord, come and quench this thirsting of my soul.” Are we experiencing pain right now? There is a balm in Gilead. Jesus extends His touch to all of us and says “Tell me where it hurts.”

Let us pray: O God, forgive what we have been, correct what we are, and order what we shall be.

Thanks to Dr. James Forbes for his insights into this text.