

Series: The Words of Jesus—Private Instructions
Today: The Jesus Style: Meeting the Deepest Need
Text: John 4:7-26

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
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A friend of mine was working on his doctorate, and his church helped him with part of his research. He was an associate pastor in a large church with a television ministry which aired in a regional market, and the ministry agreed to allow him to survey a cross section of their viewers on several successive Sundays. Over 20,000 responses were collected.

The survey had only one statement to which the viewer was to respond. This was the statement: *“My deepest need in living is...”* Viewers were left to fill in the blank. How would you respond to that statement? What is your deepest need in living?

The results were staggering. The #1 need out of all those who responded was concisely expressed by one man who wrote: *“My deepest need in living is to have someone know me—really know me—and not go away.”*

I believe my friend hit upon a common need that all of us have. It is why we seek a partner in life to share life’s ups and downs, and why it is such a disappointment when marriages and domestic partnerships don’t work out for one reason or another. It is why we need friends to remind us that we are not alone. Longing to be known at the deepest level of our being and to have the person who knows us commit themselves to be with us is one of the deepest needs of human existence.

This is the situation of the Samaritan woman whom Jesus meets at Jacob’s well. In the beautifully crafted dialogue by John, we are privileged to the way Jesus went about

the business of building human relationships. The woman needed what each of us needs; to have someone know her—really know her—and not go away.

So let's look at the dialogue and recognize that in it there is a style of relating that challenges us to think about our style of relating. It is a style which: 1) Breaks Through Barriers; 2) Speaks the Truth in Love; and 3) Offers a Sense of Hope.

Breaks through Barriers

There were several barriers which Jesus had to overcome in order to be in a relationship with the woman at the well. The woman had come to draw water from the historic watering place of her people. In the distance she may have seen the holy mountain where her people believed God was to be worshipped.

However, the way John reports this encounter has her coming alone, outside the protection of the city walls, in the heat of the day. If you read between the lines you know that there is something in that message. Women usually went to the well together, in the center of the city, early in the morning or at sunset in order to avoid the heat. This woman was forced to go to a well outside the city, in the hottest part of the day. It is a message to the reader that didn't fit in with the other women; that she is a woman of questionable moral character.

Then there was the problem of the woman being a Samaritan and Jesus being a Jew. Jews and Samaritans had no dealings with one another by long-standing tradition. Jewish ancestors had intermarried with the Palestinians living in the area. Samaritans were half-breeds who were hated by Jews because they had violated blood heritage. It was an unwritten law that Jews and Samaritans should not speak to one another.

Finally, there was the rabbinical law which decreed that a man should never speak to a woman in the street; no woman, not even his wife.

According to any one of these prohibitions Jesus should have had nothing to do with this woman. Yet, in spite of all the prohibitions; the moral judgments, the racial bigotry, and the religious law; Jesus chooses to reach across the barriers and touch this woman at the point of her need. The Jesus style of relationship always seeks to overcome barriers. It always tries to establish new foundations of understanding based on the new law of God's grace rather than the old moral codes of judgment.

Last week one of our Elders responded to my story about David Tyree's transformational faith experience with one of his favorite stories about how faith made a difference in sports. It is told by Rick Reilly who writes a column for ESPN, and he tells of a strange game of football that was played in Grapevine, TX this past November.

The game was between the Grapevine Faith and the Gainesville State School; the state reform school for troubled adolescents. What made the game strange were the fans of the Grapevine Faith. They cheered for the opponent. That's right. Parents of the kids on the Grapevine team cheered for the other side.

It was Coach Kris Hogan's idea, the coach of the Grapevine team. What if half of the grapevine fans—for one night only—cheered for the other team? He sent out an email asking the Faithful to do just that. "Here's the message I want you to send:" Hogan wrote. "You are just as valuable as any other person on planet Earth."

Some people were naturally confused. One Faith player walked into Hogan's office and asked, "Coach, why are we doing this?" And Hogan said, "Imagine if you

didn't have a home life. Imagine if everybody had pretty much given up on you. Now imagine what it would mean for hundreds of people to suddenly believe in you."

It was a strange experience for boys who most people cross the street to avoid. "We can tell people are a little afraid of us when we come to the games," says Gerald, a lineman who will wind up doing more than three years. "You can see it in their eyes. They're lookin' at us like we're criminals. But these people, they were yellin' for us! By our names!"

After the game, both teams gathered in the middle of the field to pray and that's when Isaiah surprised everybody by asking to lead. "We had no idea what the kid was going to say," remembers Coach Hogan. But Isaiah said this: "Lord, I don't know how this happened, so I don't know how to say thank You, but I never would've known there was so many people in the world that cared about us." (Source: ESPN, December 23, 2008, Life of Reilly)

The Jesus Style of relationship reaches across the barriers which we construct out of fear and touches the lives of those whom others might perceive as the enemy seeking their healing and their well-being.

Speaks the Truth in Love

The Jesus Style of relationship also speaks the truth in love. The truth is to be delivered not as a wrecking ball to destroy but as a surgeon's knife to heal. The woman at the well could have written Jesus off as another religious nut case were it not for the fact that he got very specific about the way she had tried to fill her life with empty relationships. He took the risk of becoming specific. He named the very thing which was keeping her from finding a life of substance.

Do you recall the short story entitled *Ninety Three* by Victor Hugo? It tells the story of a ship caught in a terrific storm when suddenly the frightened crew hears a terrible crashing sound below. They know what it is. A cannon they are carrying has broken loose and it is crashing into the sides of the ship with every smashing blow of the sea. Two of the men decide to risk their lives to fasten it again for they know that a heavy cannon on the inside of the ship is a greater danger than the storm outside the ship.

It is the same with people. Each of us, at one point or another, can have a cannon loose in our lives; those unresolved feelings we have about ourselves in relationship to others. Unless we deal directly and specifically with the source of our problem, whether it is estrangement from God or from others, the smashing seas of daily life are likely to destroy us from within.

Offers a Sense of Hope

Finally, the Jesus style of relationship never leaves a person hopeless. The woman has been exposed for who she is, and Jesus did not run away. In the midst of someone knowing her, she speaks words she probably hadn't spoken in a long time. She may have thought she wasn't good enough. Or maybe she thought she didn't know enough. Maybe when she cleans up her act she will be able to accept the power of God in her life. *"I know the Messiah is coming,"* she says, *"and when he comes, he will show us all things."*

Do you see it? She is on the verge of hope. She wants to try and live a different way, and Jesus won't let her go without at least offering her the possibility. There they were: eye-to-eye and heart-to-heart, and he gives her the option: *"I who speaks to you am*

he.” And from that moment on the woman could not live without at least acknowledging the possibility of a life based on something more.

The barriers which had kept her from others were torn down. Her needs had been heard at the deepest level. Someone had loved her enough to tell her the truth. And now, here was a man who knew her as she was who hadn't run away. Now he was speaking to her directly: *“God has not given up on you, my friend. I am here to prove it.”*

There is a poem I found which expresses this reality in the life and ministry of Jesus which captures what she may have been feeling:

Not merely in the words he says
Not only in his deeds confessed
But in a most unconscious way is Christ expressed.

For her 'twas not the truth he taught
To him so clear, to her still dim
But when he came, we gave a sense of Him.

And from his eyes he beckons her
And from his heart God's love is shed
Til she had lost the sight of him and saw The Christ, instead.

That is the Jesus Style of relationship! It reaches across barriers of culture, race, religion and finds the deepest need of the person and speaks to it. It does not withhold the truth, but speaks the truth in love. And it offers hope embodied in our willingness to become involved. For this we say, Thanks be to God.