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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Third Sunday in Lent
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Exodus 17.1-17
John 4.5-42

How Much Faith Do You Need?

“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

— John 4.29

At its heart, the Christian faith is an evangelical faith. It is evangelical in the most literal sense of the word—for “evangelical” means “good news,” and news, especially good news, isn’t really news unless it is shared with other people. So when we say our faith is an evangelical faith, what we are saying is that it is something that needs to be shared before it is really complete. In our day, the word evangelical has become a title for a certain narrow brand of Christianity, but really it describes the faith that all Christians cherish.

But right away talk like this makes us uncomfortable, right? If we start tossing around words like evangelical and suggesting that we should share our faith, who knows what might come next! In our hearts, many of us are afraid that if we take that kind of stuff too seriously, we’ll turn into one of those churches that counts the number of souls saved each Sunday, you know, the kind of church that has a big parking lot out back full of buses. We’re not really all that sure that we *want* to be Christians of the evangelical variety!

Besides, we tell ourselves, we don’t really don’t have enough faith to justify going around sharing it. How can we offer a faith to other people that we don’t fully understand ourselves? That’s fine for some people—people who are especially religious—but we’re not ready to get into that sort of thing, at least not yet.

I think that this feeling, perhaps more than anything else, keeps us from offering Christ to other people. Sure, embarrassment and laziness have something to do with it, but at bottom, most of us just aren’t *confident* enough in our own faith to risk making a public show of it.

What if we get it wrong? What if we make a mistake in describing who Jesus is? What if we mislead someone? There are too many risks, so we prefer to play it safe.

In an odd, almost unintentional way, this morning's gospel lesson speaks to our situation. In the course of his refreshing and upbeat story about Jesus and a Samaritan woman, John addresses our question about evangelism: how much faith do you need before you can share it with other people? John's answer to that question may have some surprising implications!

It's kind of a long story, so we might do well to review the highlights. The scene is outside the city, at a famous well where legend had it that Jacob had drawn water centuries before. Jesus has sent his disciples off to the city to buy some groceries, so he's at the well alone. In the course of his time there, he strikes up a conversation with a woman, a woman from the neighborhood, which was called Samaria.

None of this seems so strange to us, but in first-century Palestine, this was already shaping up into an *extraordinary* story. First of all, under most circumstances men didn't talk to women in public, especially women they didn't even know. Second of all, Jews like Jesus weren't supposed to associate with Samaritans—the Samaritans were hated by faithful Jews of Jesus' day because generations earlier they had allowed their faith in God to become corrupted. They were considered worse than gentiles—who simply didn't know the God of Israel—the Samaritans were considered worse because they had once known God, but had not kept to the narrow path.

So, right away, John sets up this incident to be something of an amazing story. Jesus and the woman talk, first about the most natural subject at hand when you're visiting a well: they talk about water. Jesus asks for a drink, and then after the woman gets over the initial shock of him speaking to her, she asks him some questions. Eventually Jesus makes a mysterious disclosure about himself, hinting at his special status:

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." (John 4:10)

Now if John the Evangelist were writing sappy religious literature, we might expect this woman to bow down and worship Jesus on the spot. But that isn't what happens at all. As is so often the case in the gospels, when people are told something about Jesus, confusion is the result. Jesus was speaking metaphorically about himself, but she thinks he is still talking about actual water:

The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep.

Where do you get that living water?

(John 4:11)

She never does quite get it straight and eventually Jesus gives up and changes the subject.

In the course of asking her about her husband, Jesus reveals that he already knows quite a lot about her—he knows that she's been through five husbands and that she's shacking up with yet another man. Naturally, this subject makes the woman uncomfortable, so she does her best to change the subject one more time. She knows religion is always a hot topic, so she asks him about whether the Jews or the Samaritans worship in the correct place. To this question Jesus tells her something about worshipping in spirit and in truth, which once again, she doesn't really understand.

Now, you wouldn't expect such a confused woman to be of much help to Jesus' cause, but she was! With all her confusion and doubt (and without her water bottle) she leaves Jesus there at the well and goes back to the city to tell her friends about this man that she met at the well. Even her sketchy and confused testimony brings some people out, and over the course of a couple of days, they come to believe in Jesus. The conclusion to John's story is really remarkable, especially when we remember the despised position of the Samaritans and the confused theology of the woman:

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans

came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.” (John 4:39-42)

It is a fantastic story of conversion and belief, occasioned through the witness of a woman with nothing more than the smallest kernel of faith. She didn't know what Jesus meant by living water and she didn't really understand that he was the promised messiah. Exactly what *did* she know, then?

It seems to me that, in the main, she knew only two things. First, she knew that Jesus somehow held out the prospect of something wonderful, of something that could satisfy her longings and bring moist and merciful relief into her parched life. She didn't really comprehend what Jesus meant by the term “living water,” but she knew that she was thirsty and that, somehow, Jesus addressed her thirst.

The second thing the woman knew was that she had not been living her life as God wanted her to live it. Remember when Jesus brought up her five husbands and her live-in boyfriend? Remember how quickly she changed the subject? But even though she didn't want to talk about her past with Jesus, it was his knowledge of her past that most impressed her. She didn't know Jesus, but Jesus knew her and that seemed to matter most of all. When she ran back to the city, that was the first thing she mentioned to the others: “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” (John 4:29) The Samaritan woman at the well didn't have anything like a fully developed Christian faith. All she took away from her encounter with Christ was a scrap of hope and a shred of self-knowledge. But even that meager portion of faith—when it was shared with her friends—even that meager portion was enough to draw other people out of the city. A scrap of hope and a shred of self-knowledge. That's all it took!

When you really think about it, most of us arrive and depart from church with just about what that Samaritan woman had. Few of us have a full-blown theology or a rock-solid faith. But most of us—I might even venture to say *all* of us—most of us have at least a vague sense of promises of Christ and the problems of our lives.

I'm a firm believer that nobody comes to church entirely by accident. You might come here mostly because of habit, or mostly to see your friends, or mostly to please your spouse or parents. You might come here for any of those reasons, but still, but still... You might walk in those doors for the most trivial of reasons, but still you walk in with a sense that this place can offer something wonderful, something no place else can offer. You come here looking for living water to quench your thirst, a thirst that can't be quenched anywhere else—not over at Rinaldi's, not over at the country club, not at a political rally, not out in the woods among the birds and the trees. There's something here, all right. You might not really know what it is, but you want it in your life.

And as you sit in that pew, you can't help but doing some self-examination, some soul-searching. You might not be on your fifth spouse, but your life has not been without episodes of unfaithfulness. You might not be shacking up, but you know that something you are doing isn't up to God's standards. We all need a place where we can begin the hard work of looking at ourselves honestly. Church is a good place for that, because in the presence of Jesus' love, looking clearly at the state of our lives seems a little less frightening and a little more safe.

So, I don't think you're in that pew by accident. You've got that scrap of hope and that shred of self-knowledge. The surprise is that you've already got enough faith, not only to recommit yourself to a closer walk with Christ, but you've also got enough faith to share it with other people. However much faith you have, you haven't one ounce less than the Samaritan woman at the well, and “many Samaritans from that city believed in [Christ] because of [that] woman's testimony.” (4.39)

In this community of Christ, each of us has begun to drink of Christ's living water and each of us has begun to look more honestly at the direction of our lives. Of course we don't

understand it completely! But we ought to understand it well enough to know that other people could truly benefit from joining the search that we've already begun.

Evangelism doesn't mean counting souls or loading up buses. Evangelism means sharing with other people something that has begun to bring meaning to your life. Brian McLaren has a great new name for Evangelism—he calls it “spiritual friendship.” That's all it is: talking with people about what matters in life. In the week ahead, you will no doubt meet someone who seems to thirst for something he cannot find or someone else who is feeling the need to examine her life in a way that is honest and fresh. This person may be a stranger, but more likely she'll be a friend or co-worker. You might have just met this person, but more likely you've been living on the same street with him for years. Evangelism is caring about other people enough to share what you've already experienced in Christ's presence. You don't have to know everything. You don't have to do all the work. Remember, the Samaritan woman didn't *convert* those other people, she just invited them out to the well. Like Carl Schultz reminded us a few weeks ago, “Come and see,” is the most basic Christian invitation. Come and see. Check it out for yourself.

That doesn't sound to weird, does it?