

"A MOST UNLIKELY EVANGELIST"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
March 10, 1996

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INTRODUCTION

Some time back there was a television commercial that showed a Mercedes-Benz colliding with a concrete wall during a safety test. A Mercedes engineer is then asked by someone why their company does not enforce their patent on their car's "energy - absorbing" car body. The Mercedes' design has apparently been copied by almost every other car maker in the world in spite of the fact that they have an exclusive patent. The engineer replies in a clipped German accent:

"Because in life, some things are just too important not to share with others".

DEVELOPMENT

That's a wonderful statement. Some things are just too important not to share. As Christians we believe that this "Good News" of Christ is one of those things that ~~are~~ just too important not to share.

In fact, that's an understatement. We believe that Jesus Christ must be shared with our friends and neighbors, indeed with the entire world. And this work of sharing the "Good News" of Christ we call evangelism. "Preach the Gospel at all times" said Francis of Assisi, "And when necessary use words!" In East Harlem they speak of even "gossiping the Gospel". The Christian faith has been advanced through the ages by people who were willing to take upon themselves the responsibility of being evangelists....those who spread the Good News through both word and deed.

Now it's my pleasure this morning to introduce you to an evangelist - one of those whose willingness to spread the good news has been recorded for us by posterity. I warn you, however, in advance, that this person is a most unlikely candidate for the "Evangelist of the Year" award offered by, shall we say, the Good News movement of the Church.

A WOMAN

First of all, she is a woman. Now women have always been in the forefront of our Christian faith. Why, most churches today would fall apart if women in the Church were to go on strike and withdraw their supportive efforts. But it's only in these latter years and days that women have been getting long overdue recognition in the church for their selfless acts of service. In fact, there are churches all over the world that are struggling even today with the role women should play in the community of faith...yes, whether women should serve as pastors and priests.

It's a struggle that is most painful in the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox communities of faith. A long and hallowed tradition is at stake. Perhaps you've heard of that Greek monastery at Mount Athos in which nothing female is ever allowed. Men can enter, but not women, roosters but not hens, horses but not mares, bulls but not cows. And the border is carefully patrolled by armed guards to make sure that nothing feminine passes the gate. It's been this way, I've read, for 700 years. Separate, but definitely not equal.

So, it's really remarkable that this particular evangelist that I am introducing to you happens to be a woman, and, I think, she would be as surprised as anybody about it. But on with her story...

THE WOMAN IN MIND

When she first met Jesus she was quite surprised that He even took the time to talk to her. It was at a well outside her village. She had gone there to draw water and thought that she would be the only one there at that mid-hour of the day, but here was this man...a Jew...and He spoke to her - a Samaritan woman. She was taken back. Why such things rarely happened in that day and in that time especially in that particular culture. Women were regarded as second class citizens and not only was she a woman, she was a Samaritan woman. And Jesus reached out to her. I remember years ago in March of 1954 stopping at that same well, drinking water from it....and reading in John's Gospel of that historic encounter.

It reminded me of a scene that former Supreme Court Justice, William O. Douglas once described. He was visiting a part of the Moslem world that segregates women much as they did in Judea 2,000 years ago. And one evening as Douglas was talking with two moslem women, a husband of one of the women arrived on the scene. He entered the room...cursing...and Justice Douglas said,

"His face was livid and he lunged at his wife with closed fist, hit her on the side of her face, knocking her to the ground and then he turned to me and apologized....but not for his conduct...not for his own behavior...."

Amazingly he apologized for his wife's conduct and he hoped that Justice Douglas would not think too badly of his wife for what she had done. What had she done? What was his wife's "disgraceful conduct?" She had simply spoken to Douglas!

Such was life in Judea in Biblical times. And no wonder the woman in our lesson for today was shocked that Jesus would talk to her. That was the way that things were in that part of the world. Jewish men didn't talk to strange women, especially Samaritan women. This, then, is the first thing that was somewhat different, perhaps unique, about this particular evangelist. She was a woman!

A WOMAN WITH A POOR REPUTATION

But let's go on. There is something even more surprising to consider and that is that she was a woman with a poor reputation. Her "rep" was not the best. She wasn't a very nice woman, not the kind you'd bring home to mother and now things are getting a bit sticky.

It's one thing for God to allow a woman to share the "Good News", but it's another thing for God to allow a woman with all the problems that this woman apparently had to be a witness for the Lord. This was a woman who had been married many times and when she met Jesus that day at the well she was living with a man to whom she was not married. She had a reputation that left something to be desired. Hawthorne might have described her as a "scarlet" woman. Now-a-days, of course, such behavior would hardly raise an eyebrow.

Some of you are old enough to remember when Ingrid Bergman was invited by Ed Sullivan to appear on his Sunday night program. The year, I think, was 1958. For those of you under forty, the Ed Sullivan Show was one of the leading programs on television in those days of long ago. At the time that Ed Sullivan invited Ingrid Bergman to appear on his show, Bergman was living with an Italian film producer (I've forgotten his name). She had left her husband and had mothered a child by her lover. Here's what is interesting: when it was announced that Bergman was going to be on his show such a clamor arose that Sullivan was forced to rescind the invitation he had extended to her. Can you imagine that?

Can you imagine that in light of what is allowed on TV now-a-days? I think there has been a bit of a change...a definite change...in the moral climate of our society. ~~Why, I've noted that even in Evangelical Christian circles, it is not at all unusual to find young adults living together without benefit of wedlock. Meanwhile, the number of unwed mothers keeps climbing. We sometimes~~ think that we 'invented' this new A-morality but I don't think we did. It's been around for a while, probably since the beginning of recorded history. All we've done in recent years in our society is to make it semi-respectable.

IN JESUS' DAY

But back there in the time of Jesus, things were a little bit different. There were still laws on the books that prescribed that the "adulteress" could be stoned to death. So, you can begin to imagine how surprised this Samaritan woman was that a man of the stature and the piety of Jesus would have any dealings with her at all, not only because she was a woman, but she was a woman with a bit of a shady reputation.

Oh, Jesus can be such an embarrassment, can't He? He simply did not take into consideration how the righteous people would react to His actions. Why... He even embarrassed His own disciples. They were continually having to explain His unconventional behavior...the people He associated with and the customs He sometimes ignored. But for Him to have anything to do with this particular woman was really going a bit to far. The disciples all knew why she had come to the well in the heat of the day. She was the "village outcast"! Why, she couldn't even associate with the other women. Yes, Jesus sees possibilities in her. And not only does He speak to her, but he uses a term for her that would be shocking to many people. Why, He called her "woman!"

Now, that may not seem too shocking in the English, but Bible scholars tell us that it was a term used back then...used "lovingly" as a term of endearment and that it can be translated as "special lady". And here is what is really shocking: Jesus used this same word that we use for "woman" ~~that He used~~ for his own mother - both at the wedding in Cana and again on the cross. So what you have here is a woman who was regarded in her own village as hardly better than a prostitute being spoken to by Jesus and called by Him, "woman"....a special lady.

And even more surprisingly, Jesus "treated" her like a special lady. He listened to her and respected her opinions. He did not compromise His own convictions. She went away knowing that her lifestyle must change, but He treated her with dignity as a child of God. In fact, this woman was the first person mentioned in the New Testament to whom Jesus revealed His true identity in that line, "I, who speak to you, am HE - (the) Messiah!"

HIS IMPACT ON HER

One must comment on the impact of His acceptance of her. It was enormous. Never had she been treated by a man like this.

The men she had known in her life had undoubtedly abused her...used her... and certainly they did not treat her like a "special lady". Who knows. This Samaritan woman probably didn't like men very much. Yet, at the same time she could not live without a man in her life. You may have known someone like her, somewhere, some time in your travels. Books have been written about such women. One author has called them "women who love too much". It's hard for an outsider to understand it but such women will live with the most abusive man rather than try to live with no man at all.

We tell our daughters...if a man ever lays a hand on you, get out of there. That's the only solution to most cases of domestic violence, but there are some women who will not listen. They call it love, but it really is pathological.

This woman at the well had gone from one "dead-end" relationship to another. Not one man had given her what she was really hungering for, but still she kept up her desperate search. And then she encountered Jesus - at the well at mid-day. She encountered Jesus and she discovers in Jesus what she really needed in all those years of searching and wandering.

She needed to know that her life mattered, and needed to know that in spite of her failures, in spite of her faults and weaknesses, in spite of her sins and her shortcomings, she needed to know that her life really mattered and that she was a person of worth. She did not know who she really was until she met this teacher from Nazareth. And when she met Jesus, her life began to change. She would never be the same again. She had brought her jar out to the well to draw water, but in her brief encounter with Jesus she had discovered something far more significant. She had been given the very "water" of life.

This Samaritan woman at the well probably would have liked to have stayed there in the presence of Jesus a bit longer that day, but the disciples arrived on the scene and put an end to it all. John tells us that "she went into the city...she went away into the city"....and please note this little detail for I think it's significant...."leaving behind her water jar!" Did you get that?

Was it because she was in a hurry? Probably. Someone has suggested that it might have been a bit of a ruse. When she returns, she will be able to use this as a pretext,

"I forgot my water jar!"

WHAT IS REALLY SHOCKING

But here is what is really striking and what I love about this story. This Samaritan woman who had fouled up her life in so many ways...turns into an evangelist. For she says to her friends in the village:

"Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?"

And so at her urging the people from the village come out to the well. Perhaps one or another of her five husbands is among them. We don't know for sure. But they beg Jesus and His followers, a band of Jews - to stay with them...a village of Samaritans. A good number of people from that village believed in Jesus, "because" says John, "because of His words to her". And the people say to the woman,

"It is no longer because of your word that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world".

(John 4: 42)

CLOSING

So there you have it. The story of a very unlikely evangelist. A woman. A Samaritan woman...with a shady reputation. And yet she

found in Jesus what she really needed. She found out she was a special lady. She found out that she was a child of God. She found out that she was loved. She found a sense of self-worth. And when she found out who she was and when she found what Jesus could do in her life, she went back and told the others!

I've often thought that if God can use someone like this Samaritan woman to spread and share the "Good News", maybe He can use people like you and me. Some questions to carry out of here with you to reflect on would be these:

Have you found in Christ what you need? Have you discovered because of your relationship with Him that yes, you, too, are special. And if you have, then isn't it time and doesn't it follow that you should be telling someone else. I think it does.

After all, as that Mercedes engineer with the clipped German accent, put it in that TV commercial:

"There are some things in life that are just too important not to share!"

PRAYER

Make us sensitive once again, O God, to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments. Once again we feel the deepest things within us are being stirred up and that down below the surface of our lives, Your spirit is at work.

Wrestle with us until we are conquered by Your love as it has come to each of us in the life and love of Christ. Confirm within us the feelings and the decisions, the intentions and resolutions of this hour of worship. And that captured by a vision of the Christian life, we will be lifted out of our selfishness and our littleness by our commitment to abiding values.

Minister to our personal needs. Walk through this community of faith now and be the help and comfort, the inspiration and sustenance of our souls. May we hear Your voice speaking to us...reassuring us, challenging us, summoning us to that life that we call "the Good News". In Christ's spirit, we pray. Amen.

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