

"ON JIGGLING WIRES"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
March 21, 1993

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INTRODUCTION

I came across a story recently about a woman whose car was stalled at a busy intersection. The hood was up and the woman had flagged down a passing motorist for help. She said to the man who stopped by to lend a helping hand,

"I can't get it started, but if you jiggle the wires on the battery...I think it will work...at least it has in the past. Just jiggle the wires."

Now this passing motorist who had stopped to help...let's call him a Good Samaritan...grabbed the positive battery cable and it came off in his hand. Now definitely the cable was too loose. He said to the woman in distress,

"The terminal needs to be tightened...and I think I can fix it if you have some tools." She replied with some persistence...

"My husband says to just jiggle the wire. It always works. Why don't you try that?"

The Good Samaritan paused for a moment or two, wondering why her husband didn't ride around town with her so he would always be available when the wire needed jiggling. Finally, he said to her,

"Ma'am, if I jiggle the wire, you're going to need someone else to do it every time you shut off the engine. But if you'll give me a wrench and two minutes, we can solve the problem and you can forget about it."

Reluctantly, she fumbled around under the front seat and then passed a small wrench through the window of the car into the hands of this Good Samaritan. As he tightened the battery terminal, it occurred to this man who was rendering help, how many times he had tried in his own life to get a "quick fix" from God. It went like this,

"I have this problem, Lord, and if you'll just jiggle my wires, things will be OK. I'm in a bit of a hurry, Lord, so let's just get me going again...quickest way possible."

DEVELOPMENT

But God doesn't want to "jiggle wires" does He? I think He wants us to take the time necessary to deal with our real problems and fix them. To get the "long-term" solution to the pressing needs in our lives requires a complete surrender to God and a willingness to proceed on His terms trusting Him. We have to learn to cooperate with Him in whatever it takes for as long as it takes. As this lady drove away with her tightened terminal, this Good Samaritan paused for a moment and prayerfully asked the Good Lord to "say "no" the next time he himself asks God to "jiggle a wire" to help him get going.

TODAY'S STORY FROM THE SCRIPTURES

Today's story from the Scriptures is about a lady who needed more than just to have a wire in her life jiggled. Let me recreate the scene for you and let's see if there's a message here for us. I think there is.

The setting is a village well. Like a small town Post Office, the village well was a popular gathering spot for people. They'd come to draw water and as they did, they'd share the news of the day...discuss politics, do a bit of gossiping. They would hang around as long as necessary in order to hear the latest happenings. And then, too, there were those times when visiting teachers or preachers would address folks at the well. The well was the center of activity in the small towns of the ancient world.

Now, often the women would gather water from the well early on the morning before the heat of the day or they would perhaps wait until after the sun had gone down and things were cooling off. We're given a clue that something was wrong in the life of this woman who came to the well when we first note that she came at the hottest time of the day...a time when few others would be there. Who knows...apparently this woman had a difficult life and felt uncomfortable around her neighbors, that she would be better off if she drew her water when all the others had been and gone home.

This particular well was known as Jacob's Well. It held some special memories for the people. It was the ground that Jacob had bought and given to Joseph, his son, on his deathbed. It was believed by some that Jacob had dug this well. Both Jews and Samaritans had special memories of this place; located at a fork in the road, it was an ideal place for travelers to stop and relax and have a drink.

Now, as Jesus and His disciples were traveling through Samaria, they stopped to rest and this fork in the road. Jesus sent His disciples off to look for some food while He rested at this well. It was mid-day and it was hot. There was no one around the well as Jesus sat down to rest. Within a few minutes, however, this lady approached. She was carrying a water jar to fill and expecting to find no one at the well at this noon hour, she must have been surprised to encounter Jesus.

I'm sure she was shocked when He spoke to her. Back in those days, men were not permitted to speak with women in public. A man could not even talk to his wife in public. A rabbi or a teacher such as Jesus certainly would not talk to a woman, especially a woman such as this one. First of all, she was a Samaritan and secondly, she was of a doubtful reputation. (We've come a long ways...)

But Jesus was tired of traveling. He was hungry and weary and in need of some rest. Nevertheless He engaged in conversation with her. We like to think of Jesus as always on the "go"...never getting tired - teaching, preaching, healing the sick...with amazing energy and vitality. But there were those times in His life when He needed to slow down and renew Himself. A Samaritan woman comes to draw water and Jesus somehow senses that something is wrong in her life and speaking out of the depths of His concern for her, He offers her a word of hope. He offers her some "living water". Two points for us to "pin down" here.

TO SEE HERSELF IN A NEW WAY

First-off, He begins by helping her to see herself in a new way, in a new light.

Incidentally, the longest recorded conversation of Jesus with any person is here with this Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus asks her for a drink. He says, "Give me a drink". The woman is shocked, taken back. Everyone knew that Jews did not share cups or bowls or utensils with Samaritans. This woman begins to question Him.

Jesus replies,

"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'"

As is often the case in John's Gospel, there is some level of misunderstanding in their conversation. Jesus is talking about "new life"...about "eternal life"...and the woman is thinking practical terms for she says to Jesus,

"Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep."

But still...at this mention of "living water" she does perk up. There was this legend about Jacob drawing water from the well and the water bubbled up, hence this suggestion of "living water". Anyway, this unnamed Samaritan woman asks,

"Are you, sir....greater than our ancestor, Jacob, who gave us this well and with his sons and his flocks drank of it?"

We're given a bit of a clue here to the identity of Jesus. He is greater than Jacob because He is able to give "living water"...so in the words of Jesus, "Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty." A favorite verse of many of us.

Naturally, this Samaritan woman asks Jesus for some "living water", so that (in her own words), "I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." In her way of thinking not only would she never be thirsty again, but she would never have to come here to this well again and inter-act with her neighbors....never have to face the humiliation or the scorn from other women because she would no longer have to come to this well. She would have "living water" and she would be able to experience some peace in her troubled and difficult life.

Jesus needs to do something else for this woman, however. He tells her to "Go...call your husband...and come back". Oops! He's getting closer. She says she has no husband. Jesus knows this and confronts her with it. "You are right in saying you have no husband...you have had five husbands...and he whom you now have is not your husband". She responds quickly and says, "Sir...I sense, I perceive that you are a prophet." Jesus confronts the woman at the well, so she can see herself in a new way.

At this point an interesting shift in the conversation seems to take place. What follows is a discussion of worship - when and where true worship takes place and we're provided with some beautiful references to worshipping the "Father in spirit and in truth". She asserts her belief in the coming of the Messiah to which Jesus replies, "I who speak to you am He". The disciples return and seem surprised at what has been taking place and soon she departs and is so shaken by all of this that she forgets to take her water jar with her. She returns to the town and says to people along the way,

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

CONFRONTED WITH THE PAST

As we permit our imaginations to play with all this, we sense that Jesus has confronted her with her sinful past and in all of this is offering her the gift of new life. It does happen, even today.

Sergeant Rick was a mortarman in the US Marines headed out on a troop ship to the war in Saudia Arabia. His journal records a change that took place in his life. Let me share parts of it with you.

"I've been out in the world for seven years now. (He was 27 when he wrote this.) I'm just now beginning to realize that God has been here with me the entire time. I was alone because I wanted to be. I'm realizing things I never did before. I long to live right and to be a part of God's world. I've been doing the wrong thing for so long it seems like the only thing I'm good at. I'm afraid to do what is right for fear I may slip and do it wrong. Where are the rules?

I know where they are. The rules and directives are there in the Bible. I have carried life's owner's "manual" with me for the past seven years and just now have started to read it. Not only read...but understand. Maybe this cruise is a blessing. This could be a very spiritual awakening; I pray for it. I need it.

I love God and I love the life he's given me. I am starting to realize what really matters. Money doesn't matter. Beautiful women don't matter. Loving a woman that loves you back is what matters. Raising a family with your wife is what matters.

I went the wrong way at the fork in the road. I'm groping back...it was hard for me to find the right road. Like a fool, I followed a false path that deceived me and led me no where. This was the easiest path for me. The devil controlled my life for so long. He disguised himself as a bottle of beer or whiskey, a joint of marijuana or a pill or anything that gave me a false good feeling. I'm getting good feeling now from something else. I find myself reassured each night as I rest. God came to me last night - September 22, 1990.

He came in a dream and showed me my life as I've been living it. It was a nightmare I couldn't wake from. It was so real only God could be the sender of the message. He showed me that I was throwing myself into a wall. Destroying myself. I needed to wak up but couldn't. I had to want to. I broke down begging God to make it end....now.

I woke up. I really woke up. I went to church twice today and God's messenger - the Chaplain - told me without knowing what he'd done that God is telling me to wake up from this nightmare that has been my life. I know that life will be different from this point foward. I've been grasping for the truth. I've found it! At last. Thanks be to God!"

Just as this marine was confronted with his past, so too was the woman at the well. The gift of new life was offered to her. Jesus confronts each of us and when we face the truth about ourselves, we, too, are changed and we realize what we have been missing.

OUR TASK: TO TELL OTHERS

He confronts us with the truth about ourselves. And then our task - and this is the final point I wish to drive home - our task then is to tell others that we have found the Messiah. That's what this Samaritan woman did. This woman who shied away from people because she wanted to avoid their scorn was energized to tell others... the very people who had hurt her, to tell others she had found the real thing - the Messiah. She left her water jar behind in her excitement. And perhaps the most amazing thing of all is that the townspeople believed the witness of this woman and many followed her back to the well to meet Jesus.

Back in 1979 a woman became a Christian and in the course of time she invited her husband to come to church with her. Her husband whose name is Lee Strobel is a journalist with some legal training and also a professed atheist, a tough "non-believer". He noticed some positive changes taking place in her life once she gave it over to Christ. Once shy, her faith had brought her out of her shell. Lee Strobel agreed to attend a service with her. He was astonished that the service, in his own words, "seemed to hit me where I was at." Perhaps you know the feeling. He said that the minister even used some illustrations about motorcycling which Lee liked and with which he could easily identify with.

Lee made an important discovery that day that the church which he had written "off" could be relevant and that it could have some implications for his life. He said that the people in that church were "real" people...and that they were wonderful to him. They took his questions seriously. They responded non-defensively and more importantly non-judgementally, and they didn't put any pressure on him. They gave him space; they gave him time to reflect on his own spiritual journey, and at his own pace. He discovered the genuine faith of the people in that church. Later on he wrote this, "Hey...they believe this stuff...they really do!" And his wife helped him come to a faith that he could claim as his own. It didn't happen all at once...

The people of that town long ago discovered Jesus only because of the rather unlikely witness of this woman at the well. John closes out this account with this word, that "many more believed because of His word". The townspeople said to the woman who was responsible for bringing them to Jesus,

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

CLOSING "He told me all that I ever did" she said of Him. I'd like to think that Jesus did more for this woman than merely jiggle a few wires in her life. He had shown her herself as she really was...and then He offered her living water. What He did for her He can do for us, too. Maybe there's someone present here today who needs to quit asking God to "jiggle a wire" in his or her life. Perhaps it's time to go deeper and make some real changes. It takes courage and faith, but that living water that He offers is the best of all and satisfies whatever thirst we may feel.

PRAYER

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"The terminal needs to be tightened...and I think I can fix it if you have some tools." She replied with some persistence and a note of authority in her voice...

"My husband says to just jiggle the wire. It always works. Why don't you try that?"

The Good Samaritan paused for a moment or two, wondering why her husband didn't ride around town with her so he would always be available when the wire needed jiggling. Finally, he said to her,

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

CONFRONTED WITH THE PAST

As we permit our imaginations to play around with all of this, we sense that Jesus has confronted her with her sinful past and in all of this is offering her the gift of new life. It does happen, even today. I love this passage. I've sat at this very well in Samaria.

Sergeant Rick was a mortarman in the US Marines headed out on a troop ship to the war in Saudia Arabia. His journal records a change that took place in his life. Let me share parts of it with you.

"I've been out in the world for seven years now. (He was 27 when he wrote this.) I'm just now beginning to realize that God has been here with me the entire time. I was alone because I wanted to be. I'm realizing things I never did before. I long to live right and to be a part of God's world. I've been doing the wrong thing for so long it seems like the only thing I'm good at. I'm afraid to do what is right for fear I may slip and do it wrong. Where are the rules?

I know where they are. The rules and directives are there in the Bible. I have carried life's owner's "manual" with me for the past seven years and just now have started to read it. Not only read...but understand. Maybe this cruise is a blessing. This could be a very spiritual awakening; I pray for it. I need it.

I love God and I love the life he's given me. I am starting to realize what really matters. Money doesn't matter. Beautiful women don't matter. Loving a woman that loves you back is what matters. Raising a family with your wife is what matters.

I went the wrong way at the fork in the road. I'm groping back...it was hard for me to find the right road. Like a fool, I followed a false path that deceived me and led me no where. This was the easiest path for me. The devil controlled my life for so long. He disguised himself as a bottle of beer or whiskey, a joint of marijuana or a pill or anything that gave me a false good feeling. I'm getting good feeling now from something else. I find myself reassured each night as I rest. God came to me last night - September 22, 1990.

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PASTORAL PRAYER: March 21, 1993

GRACIOUS GOD...CREATOR OF US ALL...we give thanks for this time of prayer and ask that it will be a special moment for each of us... as our spirits come together with YOU and with each other.

WE COME in these quiet moments with all of our DOUBTS, all of our QUESTIONS, all of our WAVERING WILLS, our SHORTCOMINGS and FLAWS. However YOU find us, Lord, we know that YOU will not leave us the same!

If we are DRIFTING along in our faith, call us to a clearer direction.

If we are LUKEWARM in our love, kindle in us the fire of a deeper love and a stronger faith.

If we are CARELESS in our commitments, in our loyalties, stir us to a deeper dedication.

If we are NEGLIGENT in our spiritual life of prayer, point us, O God, to the practice of YOUR presence in our lives.

WE COME TOGETHER in this service of worship, bringing not just ourselves, but others in prayer.

In silence now, O God, we name and pray for a loved or a friend who is ill...

In silence now, we name and pray for some who is lonely...

In silence, just now we name and pray for one who is in leadership in government...

In silence, we name and pray for one who dislikes us...

In silence now, we name and pray for a dear friend...

LORD...we do not need to ask YOU to hear our prayers, but we do ask to be open to receive the answers that YOU give us.

And if we are to be a part of YOUR answer in loving the lonely, or visiting the sick, forgiving an offender or an offense, LORD, enable us now to hear YOUR word of direction.

And finally, O God, we pray for our world. Much of our world is hungry, cold, homeless, lost. Much of it lives with constant violence and all of us live constantly under the threat of nuclear destruction.

So wherever YOUR people gather in worship today, we ask that YOU will be present with them and then to move them in compassionate service to all Creation, to the entire family of mankind, to all of Your children.

HEAR our prayers, offered now in the name and spirit of Christ, the life-giver - our Lord, Saviour and Master.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, March 21, 1993

I. GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors who have joined us in worship here this morning...delighted you're with us...and hope that we shall have an opportunity to greet you in a more personal way...either at the door, or time permitting, downstairs....be free in the sharing of your name. Fill out....or sign one of the Guest Books. Come, worship with us....come, work with us, too, in the outreach...
- B. Doing the Lord's work here since 1837...as a matter of fact, just last Sunday we celebrated our 156th birthday as a parish in this the world's greatest city. Roots are deep...minister at this busy corner of God's Kingdom in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit that we greet all of you....members and friends.
- C. Members: be sure to wear your name tags downstairs...make one or two new friends as well as greeting "old" friends. And remember that next Sunday the coffee hour will be "in honor" of recent new friends...a chance for you to get to know us better and catch the feel of the parish....

II. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Our parish concerns are written up in the bulletin...review them on your own...noting the study and spiritual growth opportunities that are offered: Adult Bible Class on a Sunday morning, the "Hounds" of Heaven on a Tuesday evening, 6:30. Aldersgate Class on Wednesday evening. And this coming week, the Serious Fiction series will meet again...Thursday evening.
- B. Next Sunday: annual meeting of the United Methodist Women...to vote on allocations from the November Church Fair...get under way around one o'clock, third floor Fellowship Hall. Both men and women alike are invited...make designated gifts to community and Methodist concerns. Next Sunday...but let's go back to:
- C. Last Sunday. Good turnout in spite of the blizzard and bad weather. 130 at church...5 for the Annual Meeting. Response thus far to the Endowment "special love gift"...good....still have a chance to make a gift.....in celebration of our 156 years. Anything that ends with a 6 or a "56" is fine with us! So far: \$ 1,669.00 received... have a feeling that there's more to come! Bless you. Thank you.
- D. Next Sunday: "Each One Bring One" Sunday...for the Spring. Be thinking about someone you can introduce the church to...invite them to come along with you. There are lots of people out there who may respond to a gentle nudge...invitation from you...Palm Sunday...Holy Week...Easter...may bring them back on their own. Practice a bit of "pavement" evangelism?...gossip the Gospel.

III. OTHER CONCERNS

- A. Friends from former days....
- B. Committee Meeting: Worship Committee ???

IV. OFFERING

- A. Next Sunday we celebrate the ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING appeal. Envelopes will be in the pews...as well as envelopes for the Easter lillies...next Sunday.

"It is more blessed to give than it is to receive." In this spirit, let us worship God with our morning offering.

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He confronts us with the truth about ourselves. And then our task - and this is the final point I wish to drive home - our task then is to tell others that we have found the Messiah. That's what this Samaritan woman did. This woman who shied away from people because she wanted to avoid their scorn was energized to tell others... the very people who had hurt her, to tell others she had found the real thing - the Messiah. She left her water jar behind in her excitement. And perhaps the most amazing thing of all is that the townspeople believed the witness of this woman and many followed her back to the well to meet Jesus.

Back in 1979 a woman became a Christian and in the course of time she invited her husband to come to church with her. Her husband whose name is Lee Strobel is a journalist with some legal training and also a professed atheist, a tough "non-believer". He noticed some positive changes taking place in her life once she gave it over to Christ. Once shy, her faith had brought her out of her shell. Lee Strobel agreed to attend a service with her. He was astonished that the service, in his own words, "seemed to hit me where I was at." Perhaps you know the feeling. He said that the minister even used some illustrations about motorcycling which Lee liked and with which he could easily identify with.

Lee made an important discovery that day that the church which he had written "off" could be relevant and that it could have some implications for his life. He said that the people in that church were "real" people...and that they were wonderful to him. They took his questions seriously. They responded non-defensively and more importantly non-judgementally, and they didn't put any pressure on him. They gave him space; they gave him time to reflect on his own spiritual journey, and at his own pace. He discovered the genuine faith of the people in that church. Later on he wrote this, "Hey...they believe this stuff...they really do!" And his wife helped him come to a faith that he could claim as his own. It didn't happen all at once...in my experiences, it seldom does

The people of that town long ago discovered Jesus only because of the rather unlikely witness of this woman at the well. John closes out this account with this word, that "many more believed because of His word". The townspeople said to the woman who was responsible for bringing them to Jesus,

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

CLOSING "He told me all that I ever did" she said of Him. I'd like to think that Jesus did more for this woman than merely jiggle a few wires in her life. He had shown her herself as she really was...and then He offered her living water. What He did for her He can do for us, too. Maybe there's someone present here today who needs to quit asking God to "jiggle a wire" in his or her life. Perhaps it's time to go deeper and make some real changes. Yes. It takes courage and faith, but that living water that He offers is the best of all and satisfies, I believe, the deepest thirst you shall ever have in your life.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and Your presence, O God, in these quiet moments. Confirm the feelings, the resolutions, the decisions that may be forming in our lives. Lead us to that well where we may drink of the living water that only Christ can provide. In His name and spirit we pray. Am