

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“UNDERSTANDING MIRACLES”
March 27, 2011
John 4:5-42
ALL SERVICES**

Jesus met a woman at Jacob’s well. She had three strikes against her. First of all she was a woman. Second she was a Samaritan. And thirdly, she was an adulteress. The fact that she was a woman meant that she was considered inferior. And as a Samaritan she was considered to be godless. But as an adulteress, she was condemned. But in spite of all of that, Jesus still reached out to her and loved her.

What a different world it would be if all followers of Christ would heed his words about seeing others, even strangers and our enemies, as children of God. Many so called churches today are making it very difficult for people who really need to hear the gospel to be open to the love of Christ.

Where do miracles happen? Miracles don’t happen on a stage or under a carnival tent. They happen in the midst of life. They generally happen where someone makes them possible. Jesus broke the accepted pattern of Jews and Samaritans snubbing each other. He related to the woman in a normal way, which opened the way for a miracle.

Jacob’s well is located on what was once a parcel of grazing land purchased by Jacob for one hundred pieces of silver and passed on to Joseph. In Jesus’ time it had become a part of Samaria. It is remembered largely because of an encounter there between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. Miracles occurred at Jacob’s well, the kind of miracles that still happen even today.

On their way from Jerusalem to Galilee, Jesus and his disciples were passing through Samaria. They stopped at Jacob’s well for water. Jesus rested there while the disciples went into the nearby town to buy food. While he was there alone, a Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus asked her for a drink. She asked,

“How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” The ensuing conversation was lengthy and full of surprises. Jesus suggested that he could give the woman ***“living water,”*** and she responded, a bit skeptically, that she would welcome anything that kept her from having to come to the well for water. As they continued to talk, Jesus revealed his awareness of her checkered history with men. She was amazed, and insisted he must be a ***“prophet.”*** She said, ***“My ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say the proper place to worship is in Jerusalem.”*** Jesus acknowledged this, but said a day was coming when both Jews and Samaritans would worship ***“in spirit and in truth.”*** She said, ***“I know that the Messiah is coming and he will explain everything to us.”*** Jesus said, ***“I who am speaking to you am he.”*** Later she would say to her friends, ***“Come see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could he be the Messiah?”***

Have you ever discovered, to your surprise, that someone knew you in a way, and to a degree, that you would never have imagined? It may have been a friend, a parent, a colleague, or a spouse. You were astounded that this person understood you so completely, almost better than you knew yourself. It created a miraculous bond between you and this person. You had the jarring and joyful sense of being fully known. Someone had cared for you enough to look deeply into your soul and see the essential truth of your identity and selfhood. Such intimate knowledge is a miracle. It’s a miracle of acceptance.

The enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans was intense. Jews saw Samaritans as ***“half-breeds.”*** Years before, when great numbers of Jews had been taken into captivity, captives from other nations were relocated in Palestine to live among the remaining Jews. Intermarriage was inevitable. Samaritans were the progeny of Jewish intermarriage with foreigners. They existed because of Jews who mingled their pure Jewish blood with the blood of Gentiles, which was unforgiveable.

Samaritans lived in Samaria, an area between Galilee to the north and Judea to the south. Pious Jews traveling between Galilee and Judea would not pass through Samaria lest they come in contact with the Samaritans. They would add significant time and distance to their journey and bypass Samaria on the east side of the Jordan River. Jesus, however, chose to pass through Samaria.

The woman at the well could not believe this Jewish teacher took such an interest in her. It was likely a radical exception to all her previous encounters with Jewish men. He was kind to her. He was not judgmental, even about her personal

history. He reached across the chasm between Jew and Samaritan in everything he said. He was accepting of her. This led her to believe that he must be the Messiah.

To be loved and respected is a universal human need. Our personal sense of worth is greatly affected, one way or another, by how others relate to us. We have recently heard reports of “**bullying**” in our public schools, some leading to the victim’s suicide. On the other hand, acceptance by one’s peers and significant others is a major source of self-esteem. When racial integration was enacted in our public schools, African-American children experienced the most demeaning forms of verbal abuse and hatred. At the same time, African-American children experienced a measure of respect and acceptance from white teachers and students that was literally transforming. If you have ever found acceptance where you expected it least and needed it most, you know what a miracle of grace it can be. Look at Park Hill United Methodist Church. Dr. King reminded us last week that we were built to last. Dr. Carlton Babbs knew how important it was to guarantee that the first black families coming into this congregation were not met with any demeaning forms of hatred and abuse. Integrating this church could have prevented us from ever reaching this landmark point of our journey to our centennial. This church experienced a miracle of reconciliation because of Dr. Babbs.

If the story from John 4 ended here, it would be sufficiently inspiring and satisfying. But there is more. The woman’s claims to the townspeople struck them as the truth. Immediately they left the city and went to find Jesus. Meanwhile, the disciples had returned to Jesus. Now that they had food, they encourage him to eat. But Jesus, who had spoken to the woman at the well of “*living water*” that would spring up within her, said, “*I have food you know nothing about. My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.*” Then he encouraged them to see how ripe the fields were for harvesting. They must have wondered what he meant. They did not know what miracles had already occurred at Jacob’s well.

Another miracle was in progress. The Samaritans from the town arrived at the well. They already believed in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony, and they implored him to stay with them. He did, for two days, and their lives were changed. They said, “*We know that this is truly the Savior of the world.*”

Miracles often begin when one person perceives the true nature and needs of another. Acceptance is an act of grace, in which someone is affirmed and loved

despite their faults and failures. Reconciliation is the goal of Christ for us all, so that love reigns in the world. Such miracles happened once at Jacob's well.

Focusing on the differences between people leads to relating to people differently. We will see the stranger and our best friend in significantly different ways. If we will begin to notice the similarities between people, we will begin to relate to them in similar ways. Look at nature. Nothing in nature is more like a human being than another human being. O yes, we have vastly more in common than we have differences. We are brothers and sisters of a species, and should see each other in that light.

I invite you to love as Jesus loved and to welcome the stranger in your midst. Let a miracle happen here today. If you are willing to open the way for miracles in your life, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.