

St. Mary's Sermons

John 4:4-26 & 39-42

Healed for a purpose.

Over the past few months we have been thinking about the theme of father God's love for us. I am sorry that this sermon series has been a bit disjointed because of other important festivals, like harvest and Remembrance Sunday, which have unfortunately interrupted the natural flow. I hope that this has not resulted in the series losing its impact. All the sermons are on the website so it is possible to recap if you have lost the thread or missed one of the series.

We started on Back to church Sunday, by looking in detail at the parable of the prodigal son, with its compelling portrait of simply the world's most amazing father. We followed that up by looking at how the father dealt with the self righteous older brother. We then continued to build up our picture of our heavenly father by thinking about praying to God as father; we also thought about how God not only deals with our sin but also our shame and then we have seen how we have been adopted into God's worldwide family. Today I want to conclude this series but looking again at the story of the healing of the Samaritan woman at the well.

This is just one of those stories which I keep returning to time after time; after all it is one of the most moving encounters in the gospels. More than that, it's an incident that many people in our society today can genuinely relate to it.

I like what my friend Mark Stibbe, who is the inspiration behind this whole series, points out; that this woman has been married to five different men and was living with a sixth man, now she is talking with a seventh man, Jesus. In Judaism seven is the perfect number which symbolises wholeness. She is now with the perfect man and is about to enter into spiritual, rather than physical relationship with him. In his presence her life is about to be turned upside down, or should we say turned the right way up and her deep emotional wounds will be healed. For the first time in her life she is about to be set free from the shame she feels about her past, and as a result, she will be able to enter into meaningful relationships and actually enjoy life.

When Jesus first met her, obviously the woman had a significant problem relating to men. She displays all the classic symptoms of what has been called an orphan heart. In her culture it was very unusual for someone to have been married five times. Yet despite having a relationship with all these men, she is still searching for someone who will genuinely love her.

Although we are not told anything at all about the woman's childhood it would appear as though her problems stem from a lack of her fathers love during those important formative years.

In his encounter with the woman Jesus takes her through three distinct stages. Firstly, he gently and lovingly as he possibly can, exposes the woman's broken heart. He brings to the surfaces the needs that the woman was trying desperately to cover up. In the first part of the encounter there are at least 7 tell tail clues concerning this woman's primary need. These clues lead us to conclude that she has what we would describe today a relationship addiction.

I only have time this morning to summarise these signs very briefly. Firstly by deliberately going to the well in the middle of the day, when she knew that no one else was likely to be there she was **avoiding** other people because she was ashamed of her past, but the side effect of this was that she was desperately **lonely**. Thirdly, her defensive reaction towards Jesus suggests that she is **mistrustful** of men in general. 4thly, she takes Jesus literally and completely **misinterprets** what he is saying to her. 5thly, by jumping at the chance of having living water and not having to keep coming back to the well, it is clear that she is **striving** to escape from the lifestyle in which she is trapped. Sixthly, she is **selective** in what she tells Jesus. Today we would probably call it being economic with the truth and finally she clearly has an **attachment** to men simply by the number of husbands she has had.

Having exposed her condition Jesus secondly goes on to introduce the woman to his father. Jesus knows that the only one who can truly satisfy her longing for love is Father God. She simply receives her healing as she encounters the father's love for her.

As a result of her encounter with Jesus there is no doubt that the Samaritan woman was completely healed. It occurred to me as I was preparing this talk that her healing took place in a different way to what we might expect and a different way to any of the other miracles that Jesus performed. Perhaps that's stating the obvious, after all we are all unique and all have unique needs. Normally we would expect Jesus to lay his hands on the person and pray for them, which would instantly release their healing. However on this occasion the healing occurred simply while she was talking with Jesus, without him praying for her at all.

Even today God can and does heal people instantly, through the laying on of hands, but he does not always operate that way: it's not the only model that he uses. Simply praying for someone, with the laying on of hands, is not always the most effective or the only way of releasing healing into their lives. Sometimes we need to help people face issues head on. Sometimes the presenting problem may not be the real problem and until they have been helped to address what lies at the heart of the problem, no amount of prayer will result in healing.

I have heard many stories of people with long standing ailments, who are always the first in the queue whenever there is an opportunity for prayer ministry, who have never been healed. These people frequently come away disappointed that once again God has not healed them. Maybe these people need to be helped openly and honestly to face whatever is the real cause of their problem, only then will they be healed. That's exactly what Jesus skilfully and incisively does with the Samaritan women, helped in part by a revelation given to him by the Holy Spirit.

Having had her heart captivated by the Father's love, she now drops her bucket and immediately runs back into the Town to tell everyone what has happened to her. She is so on fire with love for God that she simply cannot help but tell everyone just how good God is. It is obvious, for all to see, that something significant has happened to her and that she is a completely changed woman. No wonder then, that many of the people are prepared to follow her, to the well, to meet the person who has made such a difference to her life. And having met Jesus for themselves they too come to believe in him.

Mark Stibbe makes another simple but profound observation. In this story, the disciples do not bring a single person to Jesus; in fact all they are bothered about is their stomachs, while the woman on the other hand brings most of her village to him. That's what the verses we omitted in the middle of John 4 are all about. In fact, the woman becomes the unlikely catalyst for a town wide revival.

The reason why I chose to conclude this sermon series with this story is because it reminds us that once we have received our healing that is not the end. God always heals us for a purpose and that purpose is that we can go out and tell others just what amazing things that God has done for us. In other words we are not healed just for our benefit, or so we can simply enjoy worshipping the Father, no, we are healed for the benefit of others too. There are many even in Eastwood who are desperate to hear the news that God the father passionately loves them.

The question this morning is are we going to be like the disciples in this story and be more concerned about our needs than the needs of the people of our community. Jesus would say exactly the same thing to us today if he were here the harvest is ripe, or are going to be like the woman, passionate that others hear about and get the opportunity to meet Jesus for themselves. My

prayer is that we will be like this woman and act as a catalyst for a revival in Eastwood.