

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI
Rediscovering Jesus: Giver
Rev. Dr John Judson
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Ruth 4:13-22; John 4:1-15

Comedy is cultural. I'm not sure how many of you have ever thought about it, but comedy jokes are always culturally contextual. I learned this when I was living in the Philippines. My coworkers would tell a joke, or make pun in Tagalog, the language with which most of them grew up. They would all laugh, grin, and find whatever had been said to be hilarious. They would turn to me and ask, "Wasn't that so funny?" MY response would be to smile and say, "Oh sure," even though the joke made no sense to me. Even though I knew enough Tagalog to be able to translate the joke, I was totally mystified as to why what they said was funny. The result was that it made me realize that regardless of how long I lived in Manila, or how well I knew the language, I would always be an outsider. I would never be able to feel fully included in community. Have any of you ever felt that way? Have any of you ever felt like you were an outsider looking in on a culture, whether it be a family culture, corporate culture, relational culture, and simply felt as if you were not fully part of situation in which you found yourself? If you have, then both of our stories this morning are for you. They are about outsiders.

Our first story is about a woman named Ruth. Ruth's story begins in Israel where a woman named Naomi, her husband and two sons find themselves struggling during a famine. They hear that in the neighboring country of Moab there is plenty to eat, so they pack up and move. Once in Moab, Naomi and her husband find wives for their sons, which is where Ruth enters the picture. Over the course of time though, Naomi's husband dies. Then her two sons die. Finally, the famine abates in Israel, and Naomi plans to return to her own people. Knowing that her daughter-in-laws would be foreigners in Israel, meaning they would be unable to get husbands and find security, encourages them to remain. One daughter-in-law does just that. The other daughter-in-law, Ruth, refuses. Ruth says to Naomi, "I will go where you go. Your family will be my family. Your God my God." Ruth insists on going with Naomi regardless of the consequences because she loves Naomi. It is a risky move. So, when Ruth and Naomi return to Israel, it is obvious to everyone that Ruth is a Moabite, a foreigner, an outsider, and is thus not completely welcome.

Our second story is about the Samaritan woman at the well. To understand this story, we need to remember that Jews and Samaritans were like two gangs, like the Jets and Sharks from Westside story, who had fought a turf war for generations. They hated each other. So, the very fact that Jesus would travel through Samaria, stop by Jacob's well and engage in a conversation with a Samaritan was unheard of. Yet he does. The conversation is as confusing to us as it was to the woman by the well. It centers around this thing called living water. But more about that in a few minutes. The question before us is how could the Samaritan woman be an outsider in her own country? The usual answer is that she is somehow an outcast from her own people. This is taken from the fact that she comes to the well at noon, rather than in the morning, and that she has been married multiple times. I find that explanation unconvincing because people did come to the well at midday and it would not be unusual for a woman to have lost husbands, like Naomi. How is she then an outsider? She is an outsider to the community of God's family. She in fact rejects any notion that the God of Israel could be her God.

The gift of the scriptures is that they remind us that the God of creation, the God who became one of us, is not a God of outsiders, but is a God who gifts welcome, community, and family. We see this is the story of Ruth and Naomi. When they return to Israel, they are unsure as to how they will provide for themselves. I say this because even though Naomi has some ancestral land, it has laid fallow for years, and there is nothing on it to harvest. Ruth then risks her own life, by gleaning from the fields of others. I say she risks her life, because as an outsider, she is at the mercy of the men who are harvesting. If something happened to her, she would have no legal recourse. One day she goes to glean in the fields of a godly man named Boaz. He learns who she is and of her love for Naomi. He then instructs his workers to not only protect her but give her extra wheat. Then, like in a Disney movie, he discovers what a loving and amazing woman she is, proposes to her, and in marriage not only does Boaz welcome her as family, but so does the community. She is no longer an outsider, but is the ultimate insider, becoming the ancestor of not only King David, but of Joseph, the father of Jesus.

The question that would have confronted those listening to the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, was, “Will the outcome for this woman, the outsider, be the same as that of Ruth? Will this Samaritan woman become an insider?” The answer to these questions come into focus in a way many of us might miss because it has to do with the strange gift Jesus wants to give this woman, the gift of living water. This metaphor of living water works on at least two levels. The first is the way the Samaritan woman takes it, which is that the water has magical properties that allow a person to drink from it once and to never have to draw water from a well again...which by the way if you have ever had to haul water, would be a great gift. The second way in which this image of living water works, and the way Jesus intends it, is in reference to the mikveh baths used by Jews as they prepared themselves to come into God’s presence at the Temple in Jerusalem. The waters of those baths were never to be stagnant but flowing, alive, and moving because the water represented the process of being cleansed and transformed. They represented moving from being an outsider to God’s grace to being renewed as one of God’s beloved children. What Jesus was doing for the woman was offering her an opportunity to find a new family, a new community, as a child of God...and when she realizes this, she becomes the “mother” if you will, of the Samaritan church.

As I said a moment ago, the gift of the scriptures, the gift of God, the gift of Jesus is open arms and an invitation to move from being an outsider to becoming an insider; to becoming family. The gift Jesus gives is indeed living water that washes over us, claiming us, changing us, welcoming us, and transforming us. From the beginning to the end of the scriptures God is the one who whose desire for family is universal, all encompassing, and all embracing. Jesus demonstrates this in all that he does, bringing all persons into the life and work of God’s kingdom. This is the reason we are Everybody’s Church. When the session chose this identifier for our community, we had a long discussion on how this name could be understood. Some people said, well not everyone would want to come to our church, so how can we be Everybody’s Church. The answer was that, yes, there are many people who won’t want to come here...maybe because of our style of worship, maybe because of their own religious preferences, maybe because of our inclusive nature. But the flipside was that we wanted Everybody’s Church to represent the open and welcoming arms of Christ who offers living water to all people.

My challenge to all of us this morning is this, to ask ourselves, how are we in our lives being living water to all that meet, such that they might know they are not outsiders, but members of God’s beloved family?