

# “Something for Everyone”

Matthew 9:9-13; John 4:1-42 <sup>1</sup>

It was June in Atlanta. The sky was clear blue; the temperature was in the nineties. It was a sultry day with just the barest hint of a breeze.

The Southern Baptist Convention had just ended its annual meeting at the Georgia Dome—that’s a big religious event that happens every summer, with thousands of people in town from all over the South—and a well-known but unorthodox itinerant evangelist had created quite a stir at the meeting. He had turned over all the registration tables, cut the wires on the cash registers and computers in the huge bookstore, and barely managed to avoid being arrested.

He and his associates, a rather motley crew, were now riding their Harleys back to the town of Gainesville in north Georgia, which was the evangelist’s home town. As the group left the Georgia Dome, they came immediately to the area known as Vine City, which is adjacent to the Dome to the west. The evangelist’s friends decided that they’d go to a neighborhood grocery to see about some lunch, and the evangelist sat down on the curb under one of the few trees around.

He hadn’t been sitting there for very long when a woman came out of the social services office behind him. The evangelist called out to her, “Say, friend, is there a public water fountain around here?”

The woman eyed him suspiciously, hurriedly securing her new package of food stamps in her purse. “Dude, you don’t mean you’d drink after folks like me, do you?”

“Ma’am,” he answered, “if you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you’d have asked him, and he’d have given you living water!”

“Come off it, man! You don’t have a faucet, or a hose, or even a canteen. Where you goin’ to get any water?”

“Everyone who drinks from a faucet will be thirsty again. But whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst. I tell you, the water I give you will become in you a spring of water that will never run dry.”

“Well, mister, if you’re so hot, give me some of that water and I’ll save on my utility bills.”

“Before I do that, go get your husband and bring him back here with you.”

“Don’t have no husband.”

“You’re right when you say you have no husband. The fact is that you’ve had five husbands, and the man you’re living with now is not your husband. You’ve told the truth.”

“Hey, man, have you been readin’ my food stamp file? I know . . . you must be one of those religious folks who’ve been over at the Dome this week! Well, we worship God over here at the Ebenezer Church. You all say that church should be like it is at your big, fancy churches like 2<sup>nd</sup> Ponce de Leon or Weiuca Road . . .”

“Believe, me, ma’am, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither in the Ebenezer Church nor at Weiuca Road. A time is coming—in fact, it’s here, now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of folks that God wants. God is Spirit, and God’s worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

“Well, I don’t know about all that, but our Reverend says that the Messiah will come some day, and when he comes, I reckon he’ll settle it.”

“You’re talking to him, ma’am. *I am the Messiah.*”

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 14, 2019. Palm Sunday.

Just then the evangelist's friends came back and saw him talking to the woman. They were plenty surprised to see it, but they didn't say anything. When she saw the evangelist's buddies, she left quickly and went back to her own neighborhood. She gathered her friends and told them, "Come and see a man who just told me everything I ever did! Maybe he's the Messiah!"

Meanwhile, the evangelist's friends said to him, "Teacher, you need to eat something. We've got a long ride ahead of us."

"I have food to eat that you know nothing about."

When the evangelist said that, his friends thought to themselves, "Could somebody have gotten him something from the Varsity while we were gone?"

Understanding their *thoughts*, the evangelist said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work. Just look around you at all these folks who don't know about God's gift of eternal life. The churches have told them that I'm coming, but now they need to know that I'm here!"

Many of the residents of Vine City came back with the woman, and many of them believed in the evangelist. He stayed there all afternoon, and even spent the night there, before heading on to Gainesville the next day. ~~~~~

Many of you will have realized that I've just retold the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman at Jacob's well, found in the fourth chapter of John. Like Jacob's well, Vine City is a real place, and, having grown up in Atlanta, I've been there a number of times. Now that we're into the story, let's think about how it went when it really happened.

Jesus and His disciples were on their way from Jerusalem to Galilee. The journey took three days if you went through Samaria, six days if you went around it. Because the Jews despised the Samaritans, most Jews went the long way around and spent twice as long on the road unless they were really in a hurry.

Jesus and His disciples were taking the short route through Samaria, but the reason wasn't haste—the Bible tells us that Jesus actually stayed in Samaria for two days. Jesus went to Samaria on purpose. He went for a divine appointment. And as often happens, the person who had a divine appointment with Him had no idea about what was coming. The appointment wasn't on her calendar, and such appointments are frequently not on our calendars, either.

Walking was hot. Jesus sat down at the Well of Sychar, also known as Jacob's Well, while His disciples went into the village to buy food. And in recording that shopping trip, John was quietly noting that something was beginning to happen to the disciples. Before they met Jesus, they would never have thought about buying food in a Samaritan town. But little by little, perhaps without their noticing it, their worlds were being changed.

This story shows us four very important things about Jesus that will occupy the rest of our time this morning. These four things are so important that you might even want to write them down. The first thing is this: **Jesus understands what life is like for us.**

Jesus was hot, thirsty, and exhausted. Life was an effort for Him, as it is for us. As we so often are, Jesus was tired, but He still had to go on. The Bible reveals Jesus to be fully God, yes; but He was fully human as well. And more than this, we need to realize that Evil flung itself at Jesus with a fury that we, who go down so easily before its lesser efforts, have never, ever experienced.

Jesus understands what life is like for us. He understands our struggles. He understands our hurts. He understands our temptations, and He can help us through them.

The second thing this story shows us about Jesus is that **Jesus was approachable**. We don't know much about this woman's story, but we do know that she'd had five husbands, and she was living with a sixth man who was not her husband.

Since women of that day seldom had the right to divorce their husbands, it seems likely that this woman had been divorced by five different men, and one of the goals of her sad life had apparently become escaping the scorn of her neighbors by avoiding them altogether. Most women went to the well in the cool of the day, but this woman chose to come in the hottest part of the day . . . when she knew no one else would be there.

This woman was an outcast even of a people whom the Jews despised. She would have fled in embarrassment from one of the ordinary religious leaders of her day. She would have avoided them, even as they would have avoided her. And if by some unlucky chance one of them had ever spoken to her, she would have met the greeting with an ashamed and hostile silence. But this woman talked with Jesus. She sensed that He was for her, and not against her. And Jesus talked with her.

The fact that Jesus spoke to this woman is more than a little amazing. Rabbis in that day were not supposed to speak even to their own wives and sisters in public. For a Rabbi to be seen speaking to a woman in public was the end of his reputation. So this woman was of the wrong gender for conversation. She was of the wrong ethnicity. She was of the wrong religion. And she was most certainly of the wrong reputation. But Jesus talked with her.

This really is an amazing scene. Here is God in human flesh, tired and sweaty and thirsty. Here is the holiest of persons caring for one battered by the hollow promises of sin. Here is Jesus breaking through the barriers built by humankind. Here is God, loving the world, not in theory, but in action!

This really is Good News! This encounter at Jacob's Well tells us that no matter who we are, or where we've been, or what we've done, or who we did it with, we can come to Jesus! Jesus will accept us, care for us, heal our hurts and brokenness, and fill our emptiness. As Jesus said to the woman, "If only you *knew* what it is that God wants to give to you!"

Jesus made the same point in His encounter with Matthew in the text that we read earlier. Matthew 9:9-13 records Matthew's own account of his first conversation with Jesus. As you probably know, Matthew was a Jewish collaborator who worked as a tax collector for the occupation army. Under the authority of the Roman army, Matthew was required to collect a specified amount from individuals and businesses and turn that required contribution over to the Romans, but the Romans allowed him to keep any additional monies he could collect.

So, like all the other tax collectors, Matthew collected plenty of extra money for himself while the soldiers looked the other way. Like the woman at the well, Matthew was despised and hated by most who knew him, yet Jesus invited Matthew to become His disciple. And that leads us to the third thing I hope you'll remember from the encounter at the well: **Jesus offers us an incredible gift**.

It only takes the briefest glance at the news or at the people you see in the grocery to recognize two things: (1) we humans are desperately unhappy about something; and (2) we don't know what it is. Jeremiah diagnosed our problem long ago when he wrote, speaking for God, that "*My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water*" (Jeremiah 2:13).

The point, of course, is that our frantic and futile efforts to quench the thirst of our souls never work. We're never safe from the longing for eternal things that God has built into the read-

only memories of our souls, a thirst that can only be quenched by the living, eternal waters that God provides for us.

That was part of the symbolism of this well-side encounter. The water from a well dug by men provides only a very temporary reprieve from thirst; while the living water God gives quenches our deepest thirst forever. As the woman exclaimed to Jesus, “Oh, to never be thirsty again!”

But notice what happened between Jesus’ diagnosis of the woman’s need and His presentation of the gift she wanted. Jesus suddenly told the woman to go and get her husband and come back. It surely looks as though Jesus “jumped the track” on that one, doesn’t it?

I think Jesus asked that penetrating diagnostic question because it needed to be asked. The woman was looking for symptomatic relief, and Jesus was offering a total cure—but she had to understand and acknowledge the nature of her real problem before she could be healed. Jesus’ question compelled the woman to face herself, her loneliness, her immorality—the total inadequacy and failure of her life—so that she would understand the real wonder of His gift.

And until you and I see ourselves as Jesus sees us, we, too, misdiagnose our real problem and we fail to receive the deep healing that He offers. God’s healing gift cannot come to us until we see and understand that life as we’re living it will not do. It will not do at all.

And what is that gift? Well, more than anything else, God’s gift is the Presence and Blessing and Love of God. God’s gift is forgiveness, and permission to begin life again, without the weight and burden of the past.

That’s Good News, and that leads us to the fourth thing I hope you’ll remember from this story—that **Jesus offers a purpose that is big enough for all your life**. When she finally understood what Jesus was offering, the woman ran to get her friends, asking them to come to meet Jesus, too.

As Jesus told His disciples, *“I have a kind of food you know nothing about. . . . My nourishment comes from doing the will of God, who sent me, and from finishing his work. . . . Wake up and look around. The fields are already ripe for harvest. The harvesters are paid good wages, and the fruit they harvest is people brought to eternal life. What joy awaits both the planter and the harvester alike!”* (John 4:32-36).

Jesus met the woman where she was, both physically and spiritually. He helped her identify her real situation, and He showed her God’s provision for her need. God’s purpose for our lives is that we do the very same thing with the people in the circles of our own lives.

Once you and I have discovered that Jesus understands us and that Jesus is approachable, accepting His gift of forgiveness and new life in the bargain, then we become able to invite others to come to Him as well. If we can help our friends and neighbors, our coworkers and our family members to discover that God’s provision in Jesus is exactly what their hearts are searching for, the quenching spring for their deepest thirst, many of them will accept that gift.

And as we share that Good News as we go about our daily lives, we, like Jesus, will have “food to eat” that the world neither sees nor understands. Our obedience will nourish our own spirits. It will satisfy our own thirst, fill our own hunger, and brighten our own darkness. Our lives will have new purpose, and life will never be the same again.

So how is it with you today? Have you met Jesus and received the wonderful gift He gives? Perhaps you’ve been drawn to this service today because you have a divine appointment

here. Remember that Jesus came to call “*not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners*” (Matthew 9:13).

Most of us in this room are believers, but perhaps we, too, need to be reminded that Jesus knows all about our troubles. Perhaps we, too, need to remember that He is both approachable and here. Perhaps, we, too, need to return to Him.

Finally, I wonder who the “women at the well” are in your life and in mine. May God give us eyes to see and ears to hear the silent desperation of the persons we see every day. And may we, as this woman did in Sychar and in Vine City, invite them to “Come, and see!”

Invitation: #609 “No, Not One!”