

## **Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**

February 4, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 42: 1-5; John 4: 1-42

### **“The Day Jesus Smiled”**

*Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen*

Do you picture Jesus smiling? Honestly. Put aside any of the pictures you may have seen of Jesus gathering children around him. When you have read or listened to the gospel stories about Jesus — his preaching, miracles, interactions with his disciples and others — have you pictured him smiling? Truthfully, I don't think I have. I imagine him serious, pious, and at times kindly, but not smiling...until this week. When we read this gospel story in the Wednesday morning Bible study, I caught Jesus smiling as he sat by the well... smiling.

The disciples came back from their trip to the supermarket and found Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman by the town's well. They were not smiling. Their mouths were gaping open in surprise, maybe shock. Jesus was talking to a Samaritan. The Jews didn't talk to Samaritans. Their ancestors considered Samaritans betrayers of the true Jewish faith. Usually, the Jews wouldn't even travel through their land, but Jesus did and the disciples followed. If that wasn't bad enough, Jesus was talking to a woman who was obviously not a relative — another taboo in some branches of Judaism. AND he was talking to a woman of questionable reputation — otherwise she would have been coming to well in the morning or early evening to gather water and share some time with the other women of the village. *She* was here at noon.

Jesus was speaking to an unclean Samaritan woman. The disciples were astonished, it says. They were probably relieved when she ran off to the town, forgetting her water jar. When they joined Jesus, urging him to eat, Jesus just smiled. “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” I know it doesn't say he smiled but that is what I imagined this time when I heard and read this story. In typical John style, the disciples misinterpret his comment about food. They're looking around for discarded food wrappers to see from where Jesus had gotten

food. Jesus just gives his head a shake and continues to smile, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.”

I imagine Jesus so full of joy and wonder that it overflows on his face. He has had this surprising interaction with a woman. He could have avoided it but he didn't. The woman could have refused this strange, Jewish man's overture, but she didn't. Here is the work of the Holy Spirit unfolding in an unexpected place between two people who aren't supposed to associate let alone converse. Jesus asks for water. She questions his request. She knows the usual rules for Jews and Samaritans who would never touch the same cup or utensils. Jesus tells her if she realized who he was, she would be asking HIM for fresh living water. Being quite practical, she asks how he plans to do that when he doesn't even have a bucket and there's no flowing water source nearby. Jesus again speaks of having water to offer that will never leave her thirsty and gush up to eternal life. Again, ever practical, she asks for this water that he has so she will not ever need another drink or have to draw another bucket of water.

Then this conversation, which was never supposed to happen, takes another turn. “Go, call your husband, and come back.” Ah, will she turn away in anger or shame? No, instead, she bravely stands her ground, no matter how she may be judged by this man. “I have no husband.” “You're honest,” he says, without further editorial comment, “for you have had five husbands and the one you have is not your husband. You have spoken truthfully.” The Samaritan woman acknowledges that Jesus has some kind of special power but changes the topic from herself to the long standing religious debate— Can God only be worshiped in Jerusalem as the Jews have said with which the Samaritans have disagreed? Instead of calling her on the change of topic, Jesus follows her lead. He answers that the time has come when the place you worship does not matter, only that one worships the true God in spirit and truth. “Well,” the woman says, “I know that the Messiah is coming.” Then the bombshell. If this were a movie, there would be dramatic music and then perfect silence as Jesus says, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” The eyes of the woman and Jesus meet, as the truth settles on all of us.

Something shifts inside the Samaritan woman. Something about this Jesus, something about his tone, his openness, his words touches her in deep and unexpected ways. She turns, leaving her valuable water jug, to go to the town and

the people that she has always tried to avoid. Usually she would be controlled by the shame, fear or anger she would experience in their presence. But this time, with this something welling in her heart, she dares to cross over the line to tell them, “Come see this man who has told me everything about myself. He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” She isn’t totally sure who or what Jesus is, but it is important enough that she crosses over barriers and risks rejection and ridicule to tell her neighbors. Back at the well, I imagine Jesus smiling.

Jesus “is on tiptoe at what just happened...[the conversation with the Samaritan woman and her reaction] have shown him that there, outside the boundaries of the chosen people, away from Jerusalem itself, there is a spiritual hunger which... is ready to hear what he has to say. As a result, he can see, in his mind’s eye, the fields of corn turning white, ready for harvest....The thought of a brand new mission field opening up for the harvest of the gospel was exciting.... The moment [of fulfillment and harvest] has come [even here, in Samaria]. And the unlikely midday conversation with a puzzled and outcast woman has made Jesus realize it in a new way.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus tries to tell the disciples, but his talk of reaping, sowing, gathering is a puzzle to them. Then other Samaritans come to Jesus because of the woman’s testimony. They asked him to stay so they could learn more. Jesus stayed with those with whom no good Jew was supposed to be. More Samaritans came to believe he was the Savior. Jesus — dragging his disciples along with him --- stepped over ancient lines that had kept people apart, which had labeled some “in” and others “out.”. Jesus crossed boundaries that cultivated fear, hate and division to bring the good news of God’s boundless love, mercy and grace. Jesus discovered hunger, receptiveness and acceptance where, some would think, the least likely place.

And it all began with a simple conversation. He met a woman where she was. He respectfully answered questions and offered the good news he was bringing, following her lead. Though she didn’t completely understand, it energized her to jump over her own fears and limits to share it with others. Jesus smiled at the possibilities he hadn’t realized. Jesus smiled at how the Holy Spirit could make a way for the gospel through a simple conversation at noon by a well.

This story is exciting. Jesus is excited. The Samaritan woman and the town are excited. Now it’s our turn to get excited. Like the disciples in this particular place

and story, I think most of us are hesitant to engage in ---- I'm going to say that scary word — evangelism - sharing the good news. Why? Maybe we have a poor idea of what evangelism is. It is to tell the truth about the love and goodness of God that we have experienced and let Jesus do the rest. “Evangelism is an enterprise of love”<sup>2</sup> not coercion or theological gymnastics. But we “worry. What if I do it wrong? What if people don't respond?”<sup>3</sup> [What if I don't know the answer to something they ask? What if I can't tell them where something is in the Bible?” Do you think about those kind of things? I do and I find it humbling to admit. I'm the pastor, for goodness sake; I'm supposed to know how to proclaim the good news. In here, I do. Out there, is scarier. But listen to what Jesus, smiling by that well, poured into my heart this week.

I am afraid because I keep trying to do it on my own, relying on my own understanding, will and skills. And I would guess that is why you are afraid, too. We keep forgetting “that growth in the Christian faith is not measured by our degree of independence or self-sufficiency, but by an increasing dependence on God's power. [Think of all the times God or God's messengers said, “Don't be afraid” in the Bible.] God knows that in order to “get over” fear, we need God. Jesus says over and over that the solution is not for us to buck up or muster courage from the depths of my own heart, but to lean into God and into the peace and strength God provides. Even Paul [wrote to the Ephesians:] “[Pray] also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel.” (Ephesians 6:19)

On this day when we begin a month remembering we are embraced by the light and love of God, I ask you to begin to intentionally, courageously pray to God with me to take away our fear of speaking about the love and grace of God. Pray with me that the Lord would “give us a greater love for those around us and that we can submit to the comfort of the Holy Spirit rather than to our fear. Pray with me that God would give us eyes and ears to see the opportunities and open our mouths when we would usually be tempted to be quiet.” We do not have to be Bible scholars or theologians but simply ourselves who believe that God loves, that God makes a difference in our lives, God plans to save all creation and that a church community helps us realize that. Like Jesus in today's gospel, we are called to simply meet people where they are — hurt, happy, seekers, disenchanted, skeptics,

stranger or friend — and when the door opens, we pray to the Holy Spirit to help us to share out of love, the hope, comfort and acceptance of God that we ourselves have experienced. Nothing fancy or expert, just genuineness and the truth on which we ourselves have come to rely. Remember ---. “We are powerless to generate belief or repentance in someone one else, regardless of how well we may convey the message.”<sup>4</sup> Changing hearts and conversion is God’s job. We are simply the sowers who meet people at wells and love him or her the best we can, unafraid to offer God’s blessing, to engage in honest wondering or to share how much worship or the people of your church have helped us. We are not out to wrestle or debate someone into submission. We’re simply here to share living water, do God’s will, let God take away our fears, and take comfort in the truth that no matter the reception of our simple or profound efforts, Jesus is smiling... and we can, too. Amen

Linda M Alessandri 2/3/18

## ENDNOTES

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1. N.T.Wright, John For Everyone, Part 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) pp 48-49
  2. J.I. Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1961 [2012]) Kindle location 619
  3. Aaron Armstrong, “What Is Evangelism?” as posted on <https://www.exploregod.com/what-is-evangelism>
  4. Adapted from Aubrey Hoepfner’s, “How to Get Over Your Fear of Sharing the Gospel” July 16, 2015 as posted on <http://unlockingthebible.org/2015/07/how-to-get-over-your-fear-of-sharing-the-gospel/>