

The Vows of Church Membership: 5. Witness

John 4.5-26, 39-42
Mason United Methodist Church
21 March 2010

Things are not *always* as they seem. At least that was the case in the following scenario. A woman from England had come to the Pacific Northwest to rent a house for a three-month summer vacation in the United States. Having worked with a rental agent in finding the accommodations she liked, she had returned home when the thought came to her she had not noticed if there was a bathroom in the quarters she rented (a “water closet” as bathrooms are called in England, often using the descriptive abbreviation “W.C.”). So she wrote to the agent and inquired as to the property and the location of the *W.C.*

The renting agent was unaware of the English meaning of “W.C.” but being a church attender himself, and having heard his client say she was an English Methodist, he wrote her about the *Wesley Chapel*, the closest church in proximity to the property. And so, the agent sent the following reply regarding the *W.C.*

Dear Madam: I am delighted to write and tell you that the W.C. is located just less than nine miles from the house you have rented. It is located in a beautiful wooded area. It is capable of seating 350 persons and is open on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday of each week. A large number of people are looking for seats during the summer months so it is advisable that you go early when there is only standing room. Some folks even take a picnic lunch and make a day of it, especially on Thursdays when there is an exceptional musical concert. The acoustics are so incredibly good that everyone can hear the slightest sound while inside.

It may interest you to know that my daughter was married in the W.C., and it was there that she met her husband and where her daughter was baptized. My wife has not been very well lately and it has been several weeks since she went there, and that causes her great discomfort.

I close with the desire to be of any help I can to you, and be willing to save you a seat down front, or near the door, whichever you prefer. Very truly yours.

I wonder if the misunderstanding caused the woman to cancel her vacation reservation.

Though this little story may bring a chuckle, there have been times within the fellowship of the church where simple misunderstandings have caused tremendous difficulties, and have even resulted in some persons leaving a church or the tasks to which they had felt called. When that happens, everyone loses.

The focus of this series of five sermons comes from the covenant made when a person joins the United Methodist Church. The covenant question is found in our hymnal and reads: “Will you...uphold [the church] by your *prayers*, your *presence*, your *gifts*, your *service* and your *witness*?” Today’s sermon is the last in this series, and today’s focus is on our vow to be a *witness* for Jesus.

Our Christian witness is how we come across to people not only within the church, but *outside* of it as well. *Character* has been described as *who a person is when no one is looking*. A church's character is much the same: who we are as representatives of Jesus Christ; what our lives, words and actions reveal about the Christian lifestyle; and how we handle difficult scenarios so that people maintain their personhood and dignity, and God is glorified.

The disciples must have been indignant on that day when Jesus decided to travel straight through the area of Samaria. After all, Samaritans were considered “dogs” to the Jews. They were a mixed race and worshiped at a rival temple; and Jews chose not to associate with them.

In fact, when traveling west of the Jordan River, Jews from the southern region of Judea would go north toward Samaria then travel east and cross the Jordan to travel north toward Galilee without setting foot on Samaritan soil. That involved two river crossings and a lot of out-of-the-way miles on foot. The same was true when traveling south. Hard-core Jews were indignant at the very thought of even being within Samaritan borders.

And yet, Jesus made the decision to travel straight north through Samaria; and it was there that he met the woman at the well of Sychar in John 4. At about noon the disciples had gone two miles into town to get food for the group, leaving Jesus alone at the well. While he was waiting there, a Samaritan woman came to draw water. Was this encounter by accident or by design? The trip was through the middle of Samaria, the disciples had left Jesus alone, and the woman came when she expected no one else to be at the well – a community watering place.

The men came in the morning to water their cattle. The women came in the cool of the evening to do laundry after the water had settled. The Samaritan woman was alone. She had chosen to arrive alone; and she did not expect to find anyone else present, much less be engaged in conversation – especially with a Jewish man.

Jesus disregarded the public opinion of the time about men conversing with women in public. He asked her a question (that would elicit a response): “May I have a drink of water?” Naturally, the first thing the woman said was, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?” This led to a discussion of “living water” that led to the obvious comment, “This well is deep, and you don’t have a bucket or a rope. How would you give me water?”

When Jesus said that folks who drank this water would thirst again, but those who drank of the water he would give would never thirst again, but would have a perpetual spring bringing eternal life. The woman was intrigued and said, “Then how about putting that spring in my back yard so I don’t have to walk two miles out here every day to get water and carry it back home?” [Joe’s transliteration.]

Seeing that the water discourse wasn’t going anywhere, Jesus said, “Go call your husband.” The reply was terse and to the point, “I don’t have a husband.” To which Jesus replied, “No you don’t. But you’ve had five of them, and you’re not married to the man you’re living with now.” Well, that was a bit close to home – and the woman immediately changed the subject to prophets, and the correct geographical locations of the mountain on which to worship.

After all of this discussion, the woman was on the brink of believing when she said to Jesus, “I know the Messiah will come, the one who is called Christ. When he comes he will explain everything to us.”

It was then that Jesus told her something he rarely said, “I *am* the Messiah.” At that point, the woman left her water pots [expensive to purchase] and headed back to town in a hurry, passing the disciples as they were returning with their grocery sacks. Note that the disciples would have seen this woman twice: once when they were heading into town, and now again as they were returning to Jesus’ location. Did they speak to the woman? Evidently not. It just wasn’t the proper thing to do.

However, it was here and now that Jesus would begin to change the traditional and accepted view of the status and role of women: they were people of worth not just objects to be *dis*-counted along with children, they could talk and listen, and they had feelings to be expressed. The kingdom Jesus inaugurated is a realm of inclusion not exclusion, dignity not denigration, empowerment rather than exploitation, and affirmation rather than marginalization.

This woman became an immediate witness. Her life had been changed; and she wanted to tell the whole town about this man, Jesus. She went back into the village and told everyone [verse 29], “Come and meet a man who told me everything I ever did! Can this be the Messiah?” And the people came streaming from the village to meet Jesus.

The disciples were in town, but focused on groceries. They saw the woman twice, but were focused on custom. They were with the Master all the time; but when the woman met the Master, she wanted everyone else to meet him, too. The town was ripe for revival; and all it took was a word. The word came from what some would consider a questionable source, but the good news was delivered by *her* – and not the disciples. Her head, her heart, and her spirit had been changed; and she *witnessed* to that fact.

Our witness is tremendously important to be delivered at the time and place of God's choosing. It gives a new meaning to the phrase...what *on earth* are you *doing* for *heaven's sake*?

Amen.