

*Walking with Jesus...When Your Heart is Dehydrated*  
March 27, 2011 Lent 3A  
John 4:5-42  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

If you walk through Locke Hill Cemetery in San Antonio, Texas, you'll come upon an intriguing gravestone. It's sad, really. It marks the life of a woman named Grace Llewellen Smith. No date of birth is listed, no date of death. Just the names of her two husbands, and this epitaph: *Sleeps, but rests not. Loved, but was loved not. Tried to please, but pleased not. Died as she lived, alone.*

It's not exactly a Hallmark Card, is it? I don't know if Grace Llewellen Smith wrote these words or just lived them. But either way, life had a hard edge for her. She *loved, but was loved not....* You can imagine long nights, a restless bed, no response to the letters she wrote. She *tried to please, but pleased not....* You can almost hear the words of disappointment hurled in her direction. "How many times do I have to tell you?" "Why can't you do anything right?" Then one sad day, Grace's old and dried up heart gave out. And she *died as she lived—alone.*

I wonder how many Grace Llewellen Smiths there are in our world. More than we know. A bag lady shuffling down the street in Minneapolis. A widow in Chicago with very few friends. A family in Rochester that's in danger of losing their home. Grace Llewellen Smith represents all those persons who doubt whether the world needs them, who are convinced that no one really cares. Insignificance and futility are a big part of their lives. And unless something comes along and changes their situation, the epitaph from Locke Hill Cemetery just might be theirs.

Grace Llewellen Smith shows up in our gospel for today. She's a Samaritan, so she knows the sting of racism. She's a woman, so she's knows what it's like to be treated as property. She's been married to five different men, so she knows the sound of slamming doors.

On this particular day, she comes to the well at noon. Why she didn't go earlier and avoid the heat of the day, we can't say. Maybe she did. Maybe she needs extra water because it's a hot summer day. Or, more likely, maybe she wants to avoid the other women. They

have sharp tongues. *Shhh. Did you hear? She's got a new man. How can she live with herself?*

Imagine the Samaritan woman's surprise when a rabbi from Galilee shows up at the well. *What's he doing here?* He's a Jew—Jews normally steer clear of Samaritans. And he's a man—it isn't proper for a man to approach a woman in public. Despite these social constraints, however, the rabbi asks her for a drink of water. She's too streetwise to think that all he wants is a drink. And in a way, she's right. He's interested in more than water. He's interested in her heart.

The two of them talk. The woman can't remember the last time anyone—especially a man—spoke to her with respect. He tells her about a spring of water that would quench not the thirst of her body, but the thirst of her soul. The woman has carried enough heavy water jugs in her day to at least be curious. “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Suddenly Jesus looks the woman in the eye and speaks directly: “Go, call your husband, and come back.” Her heart sinks. Things have been going so well. Here's a Jew who doesn't care if she's a Samaritan. Here's a man who doesn't look down on her as a woman. Here's the closest thing to compassion she's ever seen. And now he's asking her about...*that*.

Anything but *that*. I wonder if she feels like telling him a lie. Probably. *Oh, my husband, he's busy working; he'll be home later.* Or maybe she feels like changing the subject, or sneaking away as fast as she can. But she does none of these things. She stays right where she is. And she tells him the truth, “I don't have a husband.”

This is a crucial point in the story. The Samaritan woman has done a brave thing: she's *taken* off her mask. She's stopped pretending. And now she's wondering how Jesus will respond. *Will he judge me? Will he leave? Will he think I'm worthless?*

At first glance we're not sure. Jesus is quick to agree with her: “You're right. You've had five husbands and the man you're with now won't even give you his name.” This may sound like judgment, but really it's not. This isn't a “look-at-the-mess-you've-made-of-your-life lecture. This is truth telling. In a roundabout way, Jesus is commending her. It isn't perfection he's seeking. It's honesty.

The woman is amazed. *How does he know this about me?* She blurts out, “You must be some sort of prophet,” which is another way of saying, “You’re unlike anyone I’ve ever met.” She asks, “Do you mind if I ask you a question?” Jesus nods. “Where is God? My people say God is here, on Mt. Gerizim. Your people say he’s in Jerusalem. I don’t know where God is.”

This brings us to a second crucial point in the story. Jesus informs her that someday people will worship God neither on Mt. Gerizim nor in Jerusalem, but rather in spirit and truth. The woman supposes he’s talking about the coming of the Messiah. And maybe he is. But then, out of the blue, Jesus leans forward and whispers a secret. It’s a secret he hasn’t revealed to anyone, not even his disciples. “You’re talking about me,” he says, “I am the Messiah.”

The Samaritan woman is overcome. She runs off to the village and starts talking to anyone who will listen: “Come and see a man who’s told me everything I’ve ever done. He’s not the Messiah, is he?” People stop what they’re doing. Even though it’s the middle of the day, they hurry off to see the new rabbi from Galilee.

Now, did you notice what happens in the midst of the excitement? The woman forgets her water jug. This is no small thing. This, I think, is John’s way of symbolizing the change in her life. She’s leaving behind the burdens that have caused her shoulders to sag. She’s leaving behind her insignificance and futility. She’s leaving behind the shame of her tattered marriages. In turn, she announces the remarkable news to any and all who will listen: “I just talked to a man who knows everything I’ve ever done...and he loves me anyway.”

So, what are we to make of this story of the Samaritan woman, and of Grace Llewellyn Smith, for that matter? Their stories are touching, but do they hit home? Not necessarily. At least not for some of you. You already belong. You are needed and you know it. You’ve got more friends than you can keep up with and more tasks than you can ever accomplish. Insignificance and futility will not be chiseled onto your gravestone. Be grateful for that.

But others of you are different, at least some of the time. You’ve paused at the epitaph thinking it might be yours. You’ve seen the face of Grace Llewellyn Smith when you look in the mirror. You know why the Samaritan woman was avoiding people, because you’ve done it too. Your heart is often dry and thirsty. And when it gets dry enough, you might even ask: *Where is God?*

Alison Caldwell was wondering where God was. Alison told her faith story at the Lenten breakfast last Wednesday. It was both sad and hopeful. The story started on Easter Sunday four years ago. That fateful day, Alison received a beating at the hands of her husband. She was making Easter dinner when he got a call from one of his drug buddies. He announced he was leaving and going to hook up with this guy. When Alison expressed disapproval at him for missing Easter dinner, it all went downhill from there. She ended up with a bloodied nose, and a battered heart, and more.

Not knowing where to turn, one day Alison stopped at a church. She figured she'd driven by that church for at least twenty years but today she pulled into the parking lot. She wasn't exactly sure why. Maybe it was like going to the well in the middle of the day—it just seemed like the right thing to do. Said Alison: “Little did I know that this would be the cry for help that would change everything.”

She met a pastor at the church named Shelley Cunningham. They started talking. Little by little, the mask came off. Alison quit pretending that life was okay. “Pastor Shelley listened to me,” said Alison, “She gave me a bit of advice and then asked if I wanted to pray. I don't know what I thought a pastor was going to ask me to do, but for some reason it caught me off guard. I felt like I didn't deserve to ask God to help me through the bad times when I hadn't really acknowledged him at all before. I did it, though, and afterward I realized that I really needed to. Starting a conscious relationship with God changed my life.”

One thing led to another. There were a lot of ups and downs. Eventually Alison was able to find the strength and courage she needed to leave her troubled marriage. She got custody of the children and step-children. It was incredibly hard work.

Alison shared: “It is an understatement to say the past few years of my life have been tough to navigate.... I'm still hanging in there, sometimes better than others. I'm still challenged by my own decision making. I still get down because I think life has given me a misdeal. And I get really down when it seems as if one crisis piles on top of the next. But the difference is that now I love Jesus and I believe he loves me. He is there for me in every situation in prayer, in scripture, in the innocent faces of children, and the soft voices of my friends. I know I never have to face things alone and that makes the hard times bearable and gives me the strength to face anything that comes my way.”

Friends, sometimes our lives feel small and insignificant. Sometimes our hearts are dehydrated. Sometimes life's wounds are more than we can bear. The good news is, Jesus comes walking our way. And when he finds us, he stops. He's looking for a drink of water. And more than that, he's looking to talk to us. It's honesty he's after. He wants us to take off our masks and quit pretending. As we talk to him, we may wonder: *Will he judge me? Will he leave? Will he think I'm worthless?* Rest assured, he won't judge. He won't leave. He sees you as a person of infinite worth.

You know, Jesus wants to give you living water. He wants you to be able to say, "I've just talked to a man who knows everything I've ever done, and he loves me anyway." He wants to quench the deepest thirst of your heart and make you whole.

How about this: the next time your heart is dry, ask for some of his living water...and see what happens next? Amen