

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION

Scripture: John 4:1-26; John 14:1-9

Back in the days when I was the pastor of a Lutheran church in Potlatch, Idaho, I discovered that Lutherans like to tell Scandinavian jokes. Of course, it isn't political correct to tell Scandinavian jokes, so sometimes Lutheran preachers would hide their jokes behind the veneer of an extinct civilization, like the Hittites. Once I heard Dr. Oswald Hoffman, the preacher on the Lutheran hour radio program, tell this story about two Hittites. Their names were Sven and Ole. Ole was on his way home from fishing when he met Sven. Sven said to him, "Hey, Ole, let's make a bet. If I can guess how many fish you have, I get half of them." "I'll do better than that," Ole said. "If you guess how many fish I have, you can have them both." "Okay, then," said Sven. "I guess five." "Close," said Ole. "You only missed it by two."

This conversation reminds me, in certain ways, of the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in our scripture reading. It is like they are talking past each other. Their statements don't seem to connect with what the other person has said.

Take out a pew Bible and let's take a closer look at this scripture reading from John chapter 4, starting at verse 9 (NT, p. 95). The Samaritan woman begins by asking Jesus a question: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" We are told that Jews and Samaritans had no dealings with each other. Some of you may remember the days in this country, especially in the south, when blacks and whites could not use the same bathroom or drinking fountain. That's how it was between Jews and Samaritans in Jesus' time.

The Samaritan woman asks how, but Jesus answers the question: Who? Verse 10: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water?" The key is to ask the right question. The question is not "How?" How do I get what I want? The question is "Who?" Who is this man Jesus, and what does he mean to me?

Unfortunately the Samaritan woman does not understand. She thinks Jesus is talking about ordinary water. Look at verse 15: "The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'" The woman is thinking about indoor plumbing.

But Jesus is thinking about something deeper. That is why in verse 16 he says to her, "Go, call your husband." Now the truth comes out. The woman's thirst goes deeper than water. She has tried five different husbands and is now on her sixth. She is looking for something in her life that she is not going to find in a husband. I hope you women have figured that out.

But where will she find it? Her next thought is in church. Look at verse 20. The woman says, "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Basically the woman asking Jesus, "Where should I go? What church should I attend to find fulfillment in my life?"

But again she is asking the wrong question. In verse 21 Jesus says to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” Then in verse 23 he says, “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.”

Let me come back to that statement in a moment. But now turn in your pew Bible to our first scripture lesson from John chapter 14 (NT, p. 108). In verse 3 Jesus says, “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” To that Thomas, one of the disciples, says, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Thomas is like the Samaritan woman. He is asking the wrong question. Like the Samaritan woman he is asking the question “Where?” Where are we supposed to go?”

But the question is not where. The question is “Who?” Jesus replies, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Remember what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman? He said, “The true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.” Now he says, “I am the truth.” Later he also explains that he is the one who will send the Holy Spirit to us. To worship God in spirit and truth means to worship God through Jesus. The question is not where but who. The answer is not in this church or that church or in this relationship or that relationship. The answer is in Jesus himself. He is the way, the truth, and the life.

A while back there was a commercial on television that said, “Obey your thirst.” I think it was a commercial for Gatorade. It raises an interesting question. What do you think will finally quench your deepest thirst? Gatorade? Budweiser? Starbucks? What will satisfy the deepest yearnings of your heart? Making money? Having children? Retiring, traveling, pursuing hobbies, or achieving some kind of recognition? These are not bad things; don’t get me wrong. But I suspect we will enjoy them a lot more if our whole identity—our whole meaning in life—is not wrapped up in them. If your sense of self-worth, your sense of meaning in life, is wrapped up in your spouse or your house or your children or success in your job, it is pretty hard to relax and enjoy them. It’s too much pressure. That, I think, is why Jesus says, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these other things will be added unto you.” If you seek first your sense of worth and meaning from God, then all these other things will find their proper place, and be a lot more enjoyable.

Let me close with a story. One of my favorite movies of this last year was the screen adaptation of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the first book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, by C. S. Lewis. I would like to read a short story from Book 4 of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, called *The Silver Chair*. A young girl named Jill Pole finds herself in Narnia, and after hours of traveling, she is dying of thirst. She finally comes to a clear delicious looking stream running through a meadow, but right on the path between her and the stream is an enormous lion. If you have seen *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, you know that this lion is named Aslan. Aslan is the one who saves the children in book 1 by sacrificing his life for them, and then being raised from the dead. It is clear who Aslan represents. But Jill has never met Aslan before, and she is terrified. She stands frozen in her tracks, unable to move because of the enormous lion. Then the lion speaks.

“If you are thirsty, come and drink.” ... The voice was not like a man’s. It was deeper, wilder, and stronger; a sort of heavy, golden voice. It did not make her any less frightened than she had been before, but it made her frightened in a rather different way.

“Are you not thirsty?” said the Lion. “I’m dying of thirst,” said Jill. “Then drink,” said the Lion. “May I—could I—would you mind going away while I do?” said Jill. The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience.

The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic. “Will you promise not to—do anything to me, if I do come?” said Jill. “I make no promise,” said the Lion. Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer. “Do you eat girls?” she said. “I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms,” said the Lion. It didn’t say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.

“I daren’t come and drink,” said Jill. “Then you will die of thirst,” said the Lion. “Oh dear!” said Jill, coming another step nearer. “I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.” “There is no other stream,” said the Lion.

It never occurred to Jill to disbelieve the Lion—no one who had seen his stern face could do that—and her mind suddenly made itself up. It was the worst thing she had ever had to do, but she went forward to the stream, knelt down, and began scooping up water in her hand. It was the coldest, most refreshing water she had ever tasted (pp. 16-18).

Jesus said, “The water I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” If you drink of his water, your life will never be the same, and you will be glad.

- Ken Onstot