

In Spirit and in Truth

Sermon for March 25, 1990--Kodaikanal International School
(Based on John 4:7-24)

The scripture this morning tells of Jesus talking with a woman by a well in Samaria. The very fact that Jesus would talk with the Samaritan woman must have surprised her. Good Jews would have nothing to do with Samaritans. They would certainly not eat or drink with them because Samaritans were considered impure. The Samaritans were Israelites from the northern kingdom of Israel, who had intermarried with the larger population and followed what the Jews considered to be a corrupted form of religion. In asking for a cup of water Jesus is intentionally breaking a Jewish religious prohibition. He may not even have been thirsty, but he wanted to make a point.

As the woman spoke with Jesus she sensed he was a prophet. She immediately took the opportunity to get an answer to one of the burning controversies between the Jews and Samaritans: where was the true temple of God.

The Jews had their temple at Jerusalem. The Samaritans, on the other hand, believed the "true" temple of God was in their home territory on Mt. Gerizim.

Jesus surprised the woman with his answer. He was not interested, and he suggested that God was not interested, in the differences between Jewish and Samaritan worship rituals. Instead he said something rather cryptic. He said those who would worship God must worship in spirit and in truth.

I am sure the woman thought she was talking about true worship. She wanted to be sure she was worshiping at the true temple of God. Jesus could have set her straight and made a convert to the true faith, but he didn't bother. Apparently true worship according to Jesus was something quite different.

I had an experience when I was here at Kodai 15 years ago that gave me an insight into what Jesus meant. I did a lot of hiking back then. One hike I will never forget was a hike to Palni. It was all down hill, but as we went down the mountain we came into very hot, muggy weather. It was a long, hot, tiring hike. We were met at the bottom by one of the school vans.

At the park where we met the van there was a scrawny looking couple with an obviously undernourished infant. As we passed they put their hands out to beg. Anybody who lives here for any length of time learns to cope with beggars, one way or another. Begging is a way of life for some people. It's a profession. Beggars aren't necessarily the most needy, and it is frequently the case that the truly needy don't beg. It violates their sense of self respect. In any case, beggars are a fact of life here, and we all have to establish some kind of policy we can live with to keep from being harassed continually.

As we were eating lunch, our driver went over to talk with the couple. Then he came around and asked each of us to give something from our lunch. He said the baby was sick and the parents hadn't eaten for several days. If he had come by a few minutes earlier I would have been happy to

comply. But when he asked, all I had left was my orange. I had been saving it for last. I was out of water and I was thirsty. After a 35 mile hike and a long hot drive ahead of us you can imagine how much I wanted that orange. Yet I felt pressured into giving it up.

Why these beggars? Why not some other beggars some other time? We couldn't feed every beggar that came along, hungry or not. I didn't say anything. I just handed over my orange reluctantly. When the driver had gathered up all the food he took it to the couple. Then he blew my mind: he took out his own wallet and gave them an amount of money that was, for him, several days' wages.

I have never felt so guilty in all my life. Had I valued my orange more than the life of a child? Granted, an orange wouldn't go very far, and granted, there were a lot of hungry children. The point is I was unwilling to sacrifice even so much as an orange when confronted with starvation before my very eyes.

There were plenty of ways I could rationalize my actions. The driver, after all, was in a better position to find out the nature of the problem. He could speak Tamil; I couldn't. It would have been hard for me to distinguish between a professional beggar and a truly starving person. That's not entirely true, because anybody could see these people were in bad shape. That excuse wouldn't be honest anyway, because even after the driver took the initiative I was reluctant to let go of my orange. It was the generosity of the driver that put me to shame. Even if I had known fluent Tamil would I have taken the initiative as he did?

There are so many hungry people in India. Nothing I could do would change that. Yet when you are confronted face to face with a person in need how do you respond? Our driver certainly knew the extent of poverty in India, but that did not immobilize him. He was willing to face the one situation before him and realize that he could indeed do something to help. My actions that day remind me of a cartoon I once saw where there was a whole sea of people stretched out to the horizon, each one thinking silently, "What can one man do?, What can one woman do?"

The starving family got my orange that day, but what would it have meant to me if I had offered it freely, not having to be pressured into giving it up? There are other occasions where I have responded positively to someone in need, so I don't have to guess. Such an act binds you to that person. Giving breaks down the wall of insulation and allows you to care. In giving you make an investment in a person, and as the scripture says, "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." You can't care while you withhold your help.

Giving and caring are acts of true worship that cross over all doctrinal boundaries. What the driver did that day makes irrelevant any question of his theological beliefs, what name he gives to God, or what temple, church, or mosque he worships in. The reluctance with which I gave up my orange that day called into question my own commitment to follow Jesus. It is in the recognition of our failures in living out that commitment that we need the grace and forgiveness of God.

If we would worship God we must learn to give. But giving is hard, especially for those of us who have never felt deprivation. The scripture says it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of

a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Maybe that was part of the difference between our Indian driver and me.

Jesus takes worship out of the realm of religion and theology and puts it in the context of our secular activities in daily life. If we pay attention to the stories he tells he makes this point over and over. Matt. 21:28-31 tells of a father and his two sons.

"A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today. And he answered 'I will not'; but afterward he repented and went. And he went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I will go, sir,' but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?"

He makes the same point when he says each tree is known by the fruit it bears. We are what we do, not what we say.

I have always been interested in the brief encounters Jesus had with various people like his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. If you were the Messiah and had five minutes to talk with some person, what would you say? A Roman Soldier came to Jesus to ask that his servant be healed. The soldier did all the talking. He said, don't even bother coming to my house, I am not worthy. Just say it and I trust that it will be done. Jesus did not try to convert the soldier. He didn't discuss Emperor worship or the corrupting influence of pagan religious practices. He didn't tell him what he must do to be saved. Rather he turned to the Jewish people around him and said, "I tell you I have never found anyone in Israel with faith like this. I assure you that many will come from the east and the west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of heaven. But those who should be in the Kingdom will be thrown out into the darkness." (Matt. 8:10-12)

In contrast, when Nicodemus, a devout pharisee, came to Jesus, Jesus said, "You must be born again." This was a righteous man, a religious leader of Israel Jesus was talking to, and yet this is the only man in the Bible that Jesus ever told he had to be born again! He was saying, "You are a long way down the wrong road. You have to start over at the beginning." You see, the pharisees, like many Christians today, were into religion in the abstract. They wanted to be told that they must love God with all their heart, soul, and mind. But Jesus told them that they must love their neighbor as themselves. Jesus equated the two commandments: loving our neighbor is the only way we have of loving God. That made it harder. The pharisees were ready to devote their lives to keeping themselves pure, but to them other people, especially all these sinners were just a distraction and a nuisance. So they quibbled with Jesus. Who was their neighbor, they asked? Jesus illustrated the point with another Samaritan: a religious outcast who didn't believe the right things but recognized a man in need and helped him while the priests and pharisees passed by on the other side of the road.

Jesus constantly made Samaritans, Roman soldiers, prostitutes, lepers, publicans and sinners the heroes of his stories, rather than good religious people. His point is that an act of love can't be recognized as a secular act of love or a religious act of love, a Jewish act of love, or a Samaritan act of love, a Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or Parsi act of love. An act of love is a pure act of worship apart from whatever ideas or theology the person may rightly or wrongly

believe. Whoever loves his neighbor is worshiping God, whether that person understands it in those terms or not, whether that person believes there is a God or not. When Jesus says we must worship God in Spirit and in Truth he is saying, "Look beyond the traditions and beliefs of your religion and make your everyday life an act of worship to the living God."

I want to end with one more selection from the scriptures. The setting is the heavenly court. Whether it is taken literally or not doesn't matter. The real message is very much down to earth in the here and now.

"Then the King will say to those on his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'"

May we learn to worship God in spirit and truth.