

## FROM ENCOUNTER TO COMMITMENT



*Scripture:*

**John 4: 3-15, 25-26, 39-41**

<sup>3</sup>He left Judea and departed again to Galilee. <sup>4</sup>He had to pass through Samar'ia. <sup>5</sup>So he came to a city of Samar'ia, called Sy'char, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup>Jacob's well was there, and so Jesus, wearied as he was with his journey, sat down beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. <sup>7</sup>There came a woman of Samar'ia to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."

<sup>8</sup>For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. <sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samar'ia?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered her, "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." <sup>11</sup>The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water? <sup>12</sup>Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, and his sons, and his cattle?" <sup>13</sup>Jesus said to her, "Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, <sup>14</sup>but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." <sup>15</sup>The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."

<sup>25</sup>The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things." <sup>26</sup>Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

<sup>39</sup>Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." <sup>40</sup>So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.

<sup>41</sup>And many more believed because of his word.



### FROM ENCOUNTER TO COMMITMENT

The Gospel of John was written to give the church encouragement at a time when the original enthusiasm in the churches had begun to fade. The second and third generations of the followers of Jesus were in danger of being overcome by the surrounding culture, which was increasingly hostile to Christians.

One of Jesus' disciples, named John, and some of John's students, wrote this Gospel over a period of sixty years. John wanted to remind the churches, and he reminds us now, that in Jesus Christ, God was with us and is with us still.

Not unlike the church in our time, the churches in the time of John seemed to be losing their confidence. Jesus had not returned quickly. There seemed to be a growing silence and uncertainty. People were wondering if the God who spoke to his people through the Old Testament prophets and poets, and most clearly in Jesus Christ, had now gone silent. They wondered if Jesus' resurrection was only an ancient myth. Was God only alive in the memory of the church - a fading story from the past?

## JOHN'S GOSPEL

John tells his Gospel in a way that is different from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. John doesn't trace the events of Jesus' life beginning with his birth and on through to his death and resurrection. Instead, in John's Gospel, God is revealed to us through the encounters Jesus has with different people.

### THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

One of John's stories occurs on a hot afternoon. Jesus stops for a rest and a drink of water. He has been walking all morning with his disciples, and they are tired and thirsty. The disciples leave Jesus by the well to go into the nearest town for food.

Hearing footsteps, Jesus looks up and sees a woman standing beside him at the well. He recognizes immediately that she is a Samaritan. Jesus starts the conversation, and she is startled that Jesus - a man and a Jew - will even speak to her, a Samaritan woman. He begins by asking her for a favor: "Give me a drink."

Have you ever noticed that Jesus often starts encounters with a simple request or question? For example: he asks a boy to share his lunch of five loaves and two fish; he asks the tax collector Zacchaeus if he can go to his house and have lunch; he asks a crippled man, waiting for someone to come along and lift him into the pool of healing water: Do you want to be healed? And he asks Peter, one of his most faithful disciples, "Do you love me?"

Jesus notices that the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well has waited to come in the afternoon, rather than in the cool of the morning, and she has come alone. As the conversation continues, Jesus uses questions to get beneath the surface of her life. He wants to get her attention off of the immediate necessities of life, such as ordinary water, and on to the meaning of her life.

Finally, the woman tries to change the subject. "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things." She is trying to put off dealing with the pain and

disruptions of her own life until some time in the future.

Then Jesus makes one of the most dramatic statements in the whole New Testament. He says, "I who speak to you am he." This is incredible! Jesus has not shared the news that he is the Messiah, the Christ, with anyone, not even his closest disciples. And yet he declares his identity and his mission to a non-Jewish woman he meets by chance one hot afternoon. To her he reveals who he is.

The woman is astounded! She leaves her water jar beside the well and rushes home, inviting neighbors to "come, see a man who told me all that I ever did...can this be the Messiah?" The storyteller John says that many Samaritans went to see and hear Jesus, and they asked him to stay with them for two more days. After hearing him speak, many believed that he was indeed the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

In John's Gospel, Jesus declares that he and God the Father are one, that people who see him see God, that knowing him means knowing God.

**John writes that whenever and wherever we encounter Jesus Christ in our faith journey we are experiencing the presence of God.**

**THOMAS MERTON**

Another person whose life was changed by his encounter with Jesus was Thomas Merton, a Roman Catholic monk. Throughout his life, one of the things Thomas Merton tried to do in his practice of spiritual commitment was to establish a dialogue between the monks of Christianity and the monks of Buddhism.

In a memorable encounter with the spiritual leader of the Buddhists of Tibet, the Dalai Lama asked Thomas Merton this question: "What do your vows require you to do? Are they simply an agreement to stick around for life in a monastery, or do they imply a commitment to a life of progress up certain mystical steps toward perfection?"

After a long hesitation, Merton said, "I believe my vows as a follower of Jesus Christ can be interpreted as a commitment to a total inner transformation...to becoming a completely new person."

Merton concluded, "No matter where people attempt to do this - inside a monastery or out in the world - the commitment to inner renewal remains the essential thing."

I think that's what happens to us when we have an encounter with Jesus Christ. We make a commitment to become a completely new person - a new man or a new woman. That is what Jesus was talking about in his encounter with the woman at the well. That is what Jesus seeks from each of us.

And, we become followers of Jesus Christ not for the purpose of sticking around the safety of a monastery, or in our case, the safety of the church, but to begin a journey to become new persons in Christ, living for others, and serving others, in Jesus' name. We renew our lives throughout our faith journeys by our encounters with Jesus, and these encounters deepen our commitment to be his faithful disciples.

### **THE DALAI LAMA'S QUESTION**

Recently I asked myself the Dalai Lama's question: What do my vows as a Christian require of me?

I'd have to start by saying that for me having faith in Jesus Christ means consciously striving every day to be a faithful disciple - out in the real world, a world full of suffering and violence, fear and insecurity, and death.

At the same time, while there is much pain and tragedy in the world, it is also the world God created and called good. Sometimes the earth is so beautiful it takes our breath away.

I believe I am called to be a good steward of God's creation and all of its creatures, and a good neighbor to my fellow human beings around the world. As a Christian, I cannot isolate myself, or ignore the disasters facing other people: a famine in Africa is as much my concern as a forest fire or an

earthquake in California; or an oil spill near Florida, or a volcanic eruption in Iceland.

Children born with aids or drug addiction, people without safe drinking water, farmers who try to till the ground near unexploded landmines, people who have lost their jobs and/or their homes - these are my neighbors - the ones Jesus challenges me to love as much as I love myself.

Regarding the second part of the Dalai Lama's penetrating question, my commitment as a Christian is not a life of progress up certain mystical steps toward my own perfection in order to finally earn my salvation or immortality. Far from it! My commitment starts with my sincere confession of sin, acknowledging before God my complete inability to earn salvation through any kind of good works.

I agree with Merton's goal of becoming a completely new person in Jesus Christ. For me, that means beginning with God's free and unexpected forgiveness, and my admission of unworthiness to even call myself a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. That's where I start every day.

**The steps I try to take are not upward toward perfection, they are sideways - toward other people I encounter.**

### **THEOLOGIAN TED GILL**

Theologian Ted Gill gave a farewell address to the graduating class at San Francisco Theological Seminary on the occasion of his retirement as President of the Seminary.

I heard his remarks and have quoted them many times over the years. Here is a small part of what Dr. Ted Gill said to the class of new ministers. I think it speaks to each of us even now.

"Find out where the action is, and get with it, just for the kick there is in the commotion, just for the satisfaction there is in putting strength and sense to test and to use; just for a thank offering that you've got sense and strength.

"Getting along, that's our business. Valuing variety, that is our joy. Taking people on, as is, and whether or not, that's what it's all about. Get the good out of your gifts, they are God's gifts; get the kick out of your time, it is God's time.

"Turn out, look around, where something is biting the world do what you can about it. The world is God's and so are you; we were meant for each other."

**I don't think anyone has ever said any better what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ: "The world is God's and so are you; we were meant for each other."**

### **A CIVIL RIGHTS ICON – DOROTHY HEIGHT**

Our country lost a civil rights icon recently - a woman who had fully embraced Ted Gill's challenge to "find out where the action is and get with it." Ninety-eight year old Dorothy Height, widely known as the godmother of the civil rights movement, was eulogized at a memorial service in Washington, D. C. on Friday. President Obama said, "Dr. Height devoted her life to the [struggle for equality]. . . Even in the final weeks of her life - she continued her fight to make our nation a more open and inclusive place for people of every race, gender, background, and faith."

It is said of her, that she was often the only woman in the room when Martin Luther King, Jr. met with fellow leaders of the civil rights movement. And her face was often cropped out of pictures taken of these leaders, because the press of that time, seeing a woman, decided she must not be that important.

I was particularly interested to learn that after Dr. King was killed in Memphis, President Lyndon Johnson summoned Dorothy Height to the White House to help counsel him on how to respond to the assassination.

She was a woman whose encounter with Jesus resulted in a life long commitment to bring justice and equality to those who hungered for it. Let us give thanks for Christian disciples like Dorothy Height.

### **GOD MAKES ALL THINGS NEW**

As we read in Scripture, God promises to make all things new. And that includes me, and it includes you. As God's new creations, let us seize opportunities to encounter Jesus, and let us each one renew our commitment to become his faithful disciples.

*Let us pray. Startle us, O God, with your presence as you encounter us through many people we meet. Open our minds and hearts to your Spirit, that we may be one in our commitment to serve you faithfully, and let us now pray the prayer Jesus taught us: (The Lord's Prayer). Amen.*



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