

“A Dangerous Way to Live”

John 4:5–30, 39-42

Last week, in John’s Gospel, we heard about Nicodemus – who came to Jesus “at night”, he was “in the dark”. Remember that John loves detail. Nicodemus is in the dark, but he thinks that he is one of the enlightened ones. John contrasts that with the Samaritan woman to whom Jesus speaks during the daytime. John really knows how to pull the accounts of Jesus’ life together in order to make a point.

A Samaritan woman, and not just any Samaritan woman, but a Samaritan woman who has had a scandalous past is in the light. She has had five husbands. From the context, it can be assumed that these marriages ended in divorce, and now she is just living in an openly unrepentant relationship with a man who is not her husband.

Both Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman have issues with God’s Law. It is the same issues that we have. Nicodemus was a teacher of the Law; he was one of the pillars of the community. He “kept” the Law (in the eyes of society). The Samaritan woman had repeatedly been made to be an adulterer. But keep in mind that, in that culture, only men had the right to enact a divorce. Five husbands had torn apart what God had joined together. And now she is living as if she is married without actually being married.

Nicodemus is in the dark. The Samaritan woman is in the light (within the context of John's Gospel). Being reconciled to God is not about what you do; it has to do with what you believe. Nicodemus struggled to believe what Jesus had said about being "born from above." He was reluctant to believe. He challenged Jesus' words and dismisses them as foolishness ("how can a man enter his mother's womb and be born a second time?") He rejects being born of "water and the Spirit".

Thankfully, we know that, later on, Nicodemus publicly displayed his faith as he assists in taking Jesus down from the cross and burying Him. But, for now, although he is a man honored by his community as a keeper of the Law, because of his lack of faith, he remains "in the dark."

The Samaritan woman was not a keeper of the Law (in the eyes of the community or in the eyes of God). In fact, in her unbelief, she has outright rejected God's Law. She is no longer dealing with the saint/sinner battle that is ongoing within the hearts of all of God's people. She is engaging in the "high-handed" sin. She doesn't even know what sin is. The daily task of the believer is not to keep the Law perfectly. The task of the believer is to believe that God's Law is perfectly true. She, and the man with whom she is living, have taken the public position that they can "live life on their own terms" rather than what God has ordained is good.

This is a very dangerous way to live, because this would mean that, in your mind, you have placed yourself equal to or above God as you sit in judgment of His decrees. I am quite sure that they had never

thought of it in this way, but the Samaritan woman was essentially saying that her authority to determine right and wrong supersedes God's authority. And Jesus calls her on it.

But notice that even before he demonstrates her life to be an open book, (and a book that would end up in the restricted section of the book store), he offers her "living water." Like Nicodemus, she does not fully understand what Jesus is saying. Unlike Nicodemus, she does not dismiss the blessings that the "water" has to offer.

These two people, Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, demonstrate the two most common errors people have in approaching God. Nicodemus was pretty sure that he had God figured out. He was living the life of an upstanding pillar of the community, and even with the coming of Jesus, he says, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." And Jesus shows him how incomplete his understanding of God really was.

The danger of living like Nicodemus is that you look at sin as something that other people do, so much more often than you do, that God can't possibly be upset with me about the "little things" I do. Therefore, I have no pressing reason to confess my sins, hear the absolution, hear the sweet words of the Gospel, be fed and strengthened through the miraculous union and communion in the broken body and shed blood of Jesus – who died for the sins of the world (and my little sins too).

The danger is that you would see no pressing need to receive this today. I'll be back in a week or two, or three, or when I feel my "tank

running low.” This view of God places quite a bit of trust in your own self. Again, that is a dangerous way to live.

Then you have the Samaritan woman. She also is living dangerously. She quickly and boldly states that she is waiting and watching for the Messiah who, “when He comes, he will tell us all things.” She is longing to hear the Messiah tell her all things, yet, she sits in judgment of Moses and the prophets and treats their words as if they are beneath her. God’s people are not called upon to keep the Law perfectly. We are called, in faith, to believe that the Word of God (including the Law) expresses the will and desire of God perfectly. To say that His Word, His will, His desire for me doesn’t matter and I don’t care who knows it – that is a dangerous way to live.

The good news for Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman (and for all the Nicodemus’ and Samaritans in the world today) is that your sin has not declared you ineligible to receive the grace of God. Jesus could have justifiably spoken very harshly to the both of them for their misbelief, incomplete belief, rejection and dismissal of the clear Word of God. But He chose to promise them a new life, a new reality in the promises connected with water. Nicodemus comes to faith. The Samaritan woman and her entire village come to faith. The Spirit created belief where there was once confusion and doubt. Don’t give up on those in your life who are struggling in confusion and doubt.

Like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, we have been promised and we have received a great promise joined with water. Amen.