

“GIVING CHANGES LIVES”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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John 4:1-15

She shouldn't have been there that day. The woman in this morning's Gospel lesson. She shouldn't have been there that day - there in the blazing heat of the noonday sun to fetch water from the well. No sane person would be there then. Not only would it be stifling hot on her walk to the well, but then carrying a heavy bucket filled with water back home in that same stifling sun would be a terrible struggle. She really shouldn't have been there.

And anyone who saw her going there knew that. Anyone who saw a woman all by herself going to the well when the sun was at its peak knew something was up. It wasn't right. It wasn't normal. There had to be a reason she was doing it.

And indeed, there was. She was a woman with a past, and everybody knew that. She was a woman people gossiped about, and whispered not so quietly about even in her presence. She was a woman they walked around, and of whom they made fun.

That's why she chose to go to the well when she did. It was just easier, that's all. Easier not to encounter the stares, and hear the whispers, and feel the humiliation. Easier just to suffer with the burden of carrying the water in that intense heat. It was just easier to suffer in silence, all by herself.

Except when she got there that day, she wasn't all by herself. A man was there, and it was Jesus. He knew, like the rest of them, why she was alone, but he alone, didn't turn his back on her. Instead, he reached out to her when she was at her lowest, meeting her at her point of deepest need, and helping her to see there was a way out.

In that encounter with Jesus, that woman discovered that her life wasn't a waste, that she wasn't the loser everybody had named her to be, that there was new life possible, and new hope, and not just new life and new hope, but abundant life and abundant hope - from the spring of living water that was Jesus Himself!

She went away from that place changed - she went away a new person because of her encounter with Jesus.

You know, Jesus had a way of doing that, of encountering people at the right

place at the right time, giving them just what they needed to be changed and made whole. He met that woman at the well, he met the disciples by their fishing boats and helped them to see that they could take what they were doing and make it even more by fishing for people with Him. He met them later on as they feared for the lives in a boat on a raging sea, and helped them to learn to trust in His power to calm all the storms of life.

And I daresay that over the centuries, He has met many a person in a church as they have come there looking for something more in their life. I could tell you story after story of lives touched and changed by Christ in and through the church. But I don't have to. Your's is probably one of them, or you wouldn't be here today.

Perhaps you encountered Christ through a Sunday School teacher. Maybe for you it was in a choir or a women's circle. Maybe it was on a mission project. Or maybe it was in worship. Maybe it was through your friends here in the church.

You know, just as an aside, last week, as Dianne Thompson and I were sitting up here waiting for the church service to start, we were watching all of you come in. And I turned to her and said, "You know, if I were a visitor here, I would be struck by what goes on before the service. People come in and hug each other, or put their arms around each other, or ask how things are going. You can feel a sense that people here genuinely love and care for each other, and are really glad to see each other."

That, to me, is evidence that Christ is at work in this church, touching lives, changing lives. It is a very special place - our church. And we're blessed to be a part of it because people for ages before us made sure it would still be here for us through their generous giving. They gave and because they did we're still able to be here today, growing in Christ.

Now, it's our turn to give. When we joined the church, we pledged to support it with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. We pledged to do all we can to keep this church a place where people come to know Jesus, be known by Jesus, and make Him known to others. And so we give that lives can be touched and changed by the love of Jesus Christ.

We don't give just to pay the church's bills. It's not about that. Yes, we do pay bills, but all those bills are about something that helps toward Jesus touching and changing lives. We pay electric, heating and air conditioning bills so that our church will be a place of comfort where people can come and learn about the Lord. We pay staff, so that trained people, can help produce programs and lead people to know more about Jesus. We make improvements so that this is a safe place and a pleasant place for people to encounter Christ.

Yes, through our giving we pay bills, but it's not first about that. First, it's about changing lives through encounters with Christ. That's why we give.

And oh my, dear friends, your giving is making a difference here in this place. We see it every day.

We saw it in the faces of those little 2nd graders who held the brand-new Bibles that we gave them a few weeks ago like they were precious jewels - because they are!

And we see it when we look over at a choir loft overflowing with people who realized that God gave them the gift of music and they are sharing it with us.

We've seen it in our youth, and our women and men, all of whom have had life-changing experiences at retreats in the last couple of years. They come back excited and on-fire with their love for the Lord!

We see it in the hugs some elementary school children give the mentors from this church - the hugs that say, "Somebody loves me and cares about me."

And we see it when our youth confirmation classes stand in front of us and claim the faith they have been raised in as their own.

We see it as weary mission trip participants return home - tired, but a good tired - but sharing the love of Christ in a tangible way with those who are poor in Appalachia and in the Rotating Homeless Shelter.

Lives are being changed every single day by Christ through this church, and your giving helps make it happen. Never forget that. When you sit down to write your check or fill your offering envelope, don't do it grudgingly, but do it with joy - because your giving is not just paying bills, it's helping to change lives!

You are partnering with Jesus Christ to change lives and make hope and abundant life possible! You're helping to provide the environment and resources that make fertile ground for change and growth to take place - fertile ground where the living water of Christ can flow freely and be felt deeply.

Friends, my prayer is that our church will always be like that well where Jesus and the woman talked that day. That it will be a place where people can come with their deepest needs, just as they are - and that, after having come here, they will come to know Jesus, the living water, and know they have found a home with people who will care for them, and then as they leave here, go forth as alive, faithful, passionate and compassionate disciples of Christ.

We can be that place if we give as fully, faithfully, generously and sacrificially as we can. The need is especially great this year.

I pray that when you sit down to fill out your pledge card in a couple of weeks that you won't first think of the church's bills that need to be paid; rather, that first you think of the part you are playing in helping lives to be touched and changed by the love of Jesus Christ.

So, to help you remember that, this morning I've asked one member of this church, Ed Sprague, to come and talk to you about what being at this church has done for his life.