

GRACE DISPENSERS

This is the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. A woman ashamed of her past, shunned and rejected by her people. It's the story of a woman who seeks to find value and worth in the wrong things; she has had five husbands and is living now with a different man. It's the story of a woman who feels worthless. That is, until she meets Jesus.

“According to his critics, Jesus “did God” all wrong. He went to the wrong places, said the wrong things, and worst of all, let just anyone into the kingdom. Jesus scandalized an intimidating, elitist, country-club religion by opening membership in the spiritual life to those who had been denied it. What made people furious was Jesus’ “irresponsible” habit of throwing open the doors of his love to the whosoever, the just-anyones, and the not-a-chancers like you and me.”

Michael Yaconelli, *Messy Spirituality*

In his book, *Messy Spirituality*, Michael Yaconelli speaks about two types of people: kingdom monitors and grace dispensers. In reference to God's grace he says, ***“As soon as we are included in the party because of Jesus’ irresponsible love, we decide to make grace ‘more responsible’ by becoming self-appointed Kingdom Monitors, guarding the kingdom of God, keeping the riffraff out (which, as I understand it, are who the kingdom of God is supposed to include).”*** Churches have their fair share of kingdom monitors, worrying about how people dress, what they say, whether or not people have the correct doctrine...but God doesn't want us to be kingdom monitors.

Last week Stephen reminded us that, when we have been recipients of God's grace, that grace must be returned, we must share that grace with others. We need to be grace dispensers, people who generously and unashamedly share the radical love and scandalous grace of Jesus with all people. This morning, let's learn from Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well and see what it takes to be a grace dispenser. Turn in your Bibles to John, chapter 4.

“4 Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John — ² although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. ³ So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. ⁴ Now he had to go through Samaria..”

As a reminder, the Jews hated the Samaritan people. In his book, *the Gospel According to John*, D. A, Carson says, ***“After the Assyrians captured Samaria (the capital of the Northern kingdom of Israel) in 722 -21 BC, they deported all the Israelites of substance and settled the land with foreigners, who intermarried with the surviving Israelites and adhered to some form of their***

ancient religion. After the exile (of the Southern kingdom in Babylon), Jews, returning to their homeland...viewed the Samaritans not only as the children of political rebels but as racial half-breeds whose religion was tainted by various unacceptable elements.”

So there are ethnic, racial and religious issues at play that caused the Jews to have such a hatred for the Samaritans.

Even though it was much quicker to travel through Samaria from Judea to reach Galilee, a good Jew would have gone around Samaria. Jesus however, ***“had to”*** go through Samaria. Could he have chosen a different route? Yes. But John tells us that, ***“he had to go through Samaria”***. Was it simply for expediency? No.

Grace dispensers act with purpose.

Jesus was not bound by the cultural restrictions that had been built up by years of hatred. Jesus mission to “seek and save the lost” was not restricted simply to the Jews. Jesus was not controlled by circumstance, he was in control of circumstances. Grace dispensers act with purpose and Jesus was making a deliberate choice, he had a divine appointment to keep with the Samaritan woman.

What is our Samaria? Is it perhaps a neighbourhood that is seen as less desirable, perhaps even dangerous? The Jane/Finch corridor gets a bad rap in Toronto. The Knightsbridge community just west of Bramalea City Centre doesn't have the best of reputations. Maybe it's the entertainment district in Toronto with all its bars and clubs and all its “partiers”, Church Street in Toronto, part of it known as the “Gay Village”.

Do we like the Jews of Jesus' day, go around our “Samaria”? You might say, “But pastor, I'm not Jesus.” No, you're not. But you are the hands and feet of Jesus and called to deliver the same message of love, forgiveness and grace as Jesus sought to bring to this woman. If we truly believe in this message, then we must – like Jesus – act with purpose. We must deliberately seek to deliver this message to our “Samaria” and its people.

After walking for miles he arrives at the town of Sychar. He is tired and thirsty from the long journey and so he sits down by the well. It is the sixth hour, about noon-time.

7When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” 8(His disciples had gone into town to buy food.) 9The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan

woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Let's talk about the woman for a moment. First, she has come to the well in midday. Women would normally come to the well in the early morning or early evening when it was cooler. Coming in midday was certainly out of the norm. She has also come to the well alone. Women would have come to the well in groups. There was safety in coming in numbers, but it also served as a social time for the women as they traveled to the well and gathered there to draw water.

This tells us a great deal about her. It suggests to us that she is a social outcast, that the other women avoid her company. It also suggests that she might feel ashamed of who she was, that she was perhaps trying to avoid an encounter with others. She has had five husbands and she is openly living with another man who is not her husband. Her conduct would certainly have raised eyebrows, even by today's standards. She was treated as a whore.

Let's pause here for a moment and consider the enormous significance of what is happening. Jesus chose to travel through Samaria. His disciples have gone off to buy food, likely sent off by Jesus, so Jesus is alone. He doesn't hang out near the well, he sits down at the well. Jesus has been very purposeful in ensuring that this encounter would happen. Then, he asks the woman who has come to the well for a drink.

You can tell from her response that she was taken aback. ***“You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan. How can you ask me for a drink?”*** What Jesus was doing was scandalous on many fronts. First, he's a Jewish man – she would know that from his clothing – addressing a woman, alone. Second, he's speaking to not only a woman, but a Samaritan woman. Third, she is a woman of ill repute, morally repulsive. No self-respecting Jewish man would have ever engaged in a dialogue with this woman. But Jesus did, and in doing so he communicates to the woman and to us that she has value.

Grace dispensers recognize the value in all people.

For years this woman has carried around guilt and shame. For years this woman has borne the sting of gossip and outright disdain. By engaging with this woman, Jesus has told her, and has told us, that she has value. By asking for a drink, from the same vessel that she would use, something that would have been unheard of, he is communicating her worth.

All of humankind bears the imprint of God; all of humankind has value. We can nod our heads in agreement, we can give intellectual assent to this truth, but do our lives bear out this truth that was so vital to Jesus?

Who does the Samaritan woman represent in our society, to each one of us? Who are the people who are made to feel like social outcasts, like their lives have little or no value? Is it the homeless? Prostitutes? Homosexuals? Immigrants? Addicts? Gang members? Who?

I recently came across a story of a young woman who put a promising business career on hold to work with inner-city youth. Sensing God's call, she was hired by a church where the ethnic mix was changing. Within weeks she was working with gang members. She managed to convince a few of them to attend a Bible study one evening. She was talking about Matthew 6:33, "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness". She told them nothing could come before God, not the gang, not a girlfriend, nothing. One of the gang members was so into the discussion, he reacted violently by throwing his arms back and yelling, "Dude, it's hard to follow Jesus!" In doing so he broke a window. When the church heard, they were angry about having to repair the window and restricted her from using the room. She was reaching these guys, teaching them how costly it was to follow Jesus but all the church could think of was the broken window. Kingdom monitors. It gets worse.

A few weeks later, the pastor accidentally interrupted one of the Bible studies. He sat down and spent a few minutes with the gang members. One of them decided he really liked him. "I like that guy. We should come to church on Sunday!" They sat up in the balcony with the youth worker. When the pastor came out and announced the greeting – the giving of the peace – one of the gang members spontaneously yelled out, "Hey dude, you are cool!" After the service the youth worker was instructed not to bring them back until they learned how to behave *inside* the church. Kingdom monitors.

How should the church have responded? What would Jesus do? The church should have invited the gang members down with them. They should have applauded the young youth worker who was impacting their lives and reaching them with the grace of Jesus. Instead, she was fired. The church communicated to the gang members that they had no value, or at least they were of less value than they were.

We must as this young woman did, as Jesus did recognize the value in each and every person. It may be harder to recognize this value in some rather than others, but not when we see them through the grace that God has lavished on us. We willing engage with those around us that society shuns, or – if truth be told – those that we would steer clear of. If the prostitutes, the gang members, the down and out are not welcome in the church that says far more about the church than it does about them.

Who does the Samaritan woman represent in our society? Truthfully, each of us. We've all sinned, we've all fallen short of God's glory. Jesus didn't tell us to clean up our act and get our lives together before he invited us in. We can never make ourselves worthy of God's love and grace. Jesus sought us out as he did the Samaritan woman, he entered into the mess of our lives and reminded us that we have value in his eyes. We must do the same.

Grace dispensers reveal Jesus to others.

In the ensuing dialogue, Jesus focuses not on his thirst, but the thirst of the Samaritan woman. Not on a physical thirst but a spiritual thirst. He seeks to reveal himself to her as the answer to this thirst. Grace dispensers reveal Jesus to others.

¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

Jesus is trying to point out here that he has something that he can offer that is far better than water in the well. Of course he is referring to himself, the Living Water. She is perhaps a bit sarcastic in her response, "So, where do I get it? You think you're better than Jacob?" Jesus presses on.

¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." Jesus is speaking about the gift of salvation that only he can offer. ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

The woman is beginning to recognize a need that is far deeper than physical thirst. Then comes a seemingly shocking twist in the conversation.

¹⁶ He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." ¹⁷ "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸ The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true." ¹⁹ "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet."

Why the shocking twist? It only seems shocking to us. Jesus knew everything about the woman; her situation was not a surprise to him. Jesus intentionally

exposes her sin, but only to himself and to the woman. Notice something crucial here; Jesus does not condemn her. Jesus looked beyond the obvious sin in the woman's life and looked to the need, her need for salvation. Helping her identify that need was his main concern. He is not excusing her sin, but he knows that her real thirst must be dealt with first.

She has been trying to satisfy this thirst with men. Not one, but five husbands, and now a man that she is living with but to whom she is not married. How many of us have tried to satisfy that thirst for Jesus with other things? It might be jobs, material things, relationships; nothing else however can satisfy that deep longing and need we have for Christ.

We must recognize people don't always see their need for Christ. They can't often identify the thirst they have that they seek to satiate with other things. Though well meaning, we can often be so caught up in how we think people should behave, that we focus only on behaviours and external changes. We can become condemning and judgmental, pushing people further from Christ. We need to look to their need first, revealing Christ to them in our actions and conversation, in order for them to become aware of the sin in their lives and their need for salvation.

The woman then tries to distract by moving the conversation to the subject of the right place to worship. Often when people begin to identify their longings and their need for Christ, they try to change the subject by raising side issues, it becomes too personal, too real, and often, too painful. Jesus keeps the conversation on point though when he speaks of the Father seeking worshipers who will worship him in spirit and truth. In other words, it's still about the heart condition, not about the externals.

Jesus then does something he has never done before. When the woman tells him that the Messiah will come and that he will finally explain everything, Jesus simply states, "**I, the one speaking to you – I am he.**" Jesus reveals to her directly that he is the Messiah.

We reveal Christ to others in our actions and conversation. But we also must be sure that we speak of him explicitly. Often times we'll tell people they should read the Bible, we'll tell people they need to come to church, but we don't always speak directly to them about the person of Jesus revealing him as the Messiah. Their primary need is Jesus. Jesus said, "**I am he.**" We need to state just as clearly, "Jesus, he's the Messiah. He's what you have been searching for."

I want us to be a church filled with grace dispensers, people who are willing to pour out the grace that they have received into the lives of others for the sake of Jesus and his kingdom. We've learned a few things this morning from Jesus

example. Grace dispensers act with purpose. They recognize the value in all people. Grace dispensers reveal Jesus to others. I want to wrap up with an excerpt from a story Lisa found on a blog and pointed out to me.

We sat outside on the front porch of the carehome, she, her Mom and I. Another lady in a wheelchair came out for a smoke. E. helped her find her lighter. We were commenting on different cars that came by, talking about nothing in particular. The lady in the wheelchair was punctuating our last words with, "Uh huh.....and Yes."

A cement truck went by and E. told the lady next to us that she used to drive one, in her words, "When I was young and too stupid to be scared." Her Mom, ever the harbinger of goodwill and bolsterer of egos says, "Now you're old and stupid." I blew out a breath.....The verbal assaults and barbs she always had at the ready never failed to shock me. I guess a lifetime of negativity doesn't die easily, even with Alzheimer's.

Ever the contradiction in terms, this was the same Mom who cried after she read the story I had written about her own daughter's years driving a cement mixer. How she gained the trust of the men by applying herself to being the best driver there was, even so far as having contractors request her for the most difficult jobs.

After that, we went to see her Dad. As I witnessed her attending to him, I couldn't help remembering the paranoia and the padlocked doors, the way he threatened his own daughter with violence. Things I won't even talk about here. And even though you know it's the dementia talking, it doesn't make it hurt any less.

That was also the same man who went with us when we put E's 18-year-old cat down. He cried harder than any of us.

*Day in and day out, for years I have watched her be a dispenser of mercy and grace to parents who were never there for her. **And each day she refills her cup from a Holy fountain that never runs dry.***

This is the kind of living lesson you could never get sitting in church.

One day not too long ago, her Dad said he wanted his beard shaved. (He doesn't trust the aides to do it). I honestly don't know if I could have put my Jesus sandals on for that one, but she did. It was as she finished that he said the five words she quite possibly had never heard before. "You are a good daughter."

Day in and day out, this woman was a grace dispenser, refilling her cup from a holy fountain that never runs dry. Let's seek to do the same.