

June 28 – John 4:1-30 (the Scripture will be read as part of the sermon)

Really Communicating

Rick Bush presented me with a problem that many of us face. He has heard that he should learn to communicate better. Most of us could use help on those kinds of skills. Yet, as he says, no one really tells us how to do it and we never hear about it in church, except occasional examples of poor communication. Now I am not going to turn the sermon into a lecture on theories of communication and I am probably not the best person to share about how to communicate well, since I too have been noted for failing in this category. But I believe Rick has an important question. It certainly got me thinking! So I started looking at some of the conversations Jesus had with individuals. One of the things we can say about Jesus was that he knew how to communicate. Amongst some of the longer conversations that we have recorded in the gospels are his talk with Nicodemus, with Mary and Martha, several with Peter, to mention a few, and this one with the woman at the well. The more I re-read this account the more impressed I was by how Jesus engaged her and how that engagement was life changing. So today I thought we would all explore Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well and see what we learn from it.

(read John 4:1-8) There was every reason for Jesus to ignore the woman who came to the well at noon. Let me give you just a few of them. A woman coming alone to the well during the heat of the day would have said volumes about her and all of it negative. She was obviously not welcome when the rest of the village woman came, usually in the morning while it was still cool, so we would be suspicious as to her character. She was a Samaritan and he a Jew, and Jews tried to not talk to Samaritans. And she was a woman and men did not speak to women they were not related to. There was every reason to ignore her. When the disciples return and see them in conversation they are shocked because they had bought into the cultural norms of their time. Instead of ignoring her, Jesus engaged her in conversation. One of the important things in developing good communication skills is to really see and acknowledge the person we are talking to. It is so easy to let first impressions and mini-prejudices clutter up the conversation. Think about how often it occurs. It can be an older person thinking that

kids don't show respect, or kids thinking adults are out of touch. We hear the harm racial profiling does and is doing in some places in law enforcement. When we talk about communication a good place to start is doing what Jesus did. He set aside all of the reasons not to talk with this woman. He set aside any cultural prejudices. He sees her as a person. He sees her as having something to offer and he asks her for a drink. When we engage people, seeing them as people with worth, acknowledging that have something to offer us, it changes the dynamics of a conversation. It opens us up to new possibilities.

(Read John 4:9) The woman's response is surprise. Jews don't talk to Samaritans. Jews don't touch things that Samaritans have touched. Men don't touch things women have touched. All these rules were in place because it was felt the other person might make them ritually unclean. When you really engage another person and treat them as an equal with something to give, surprise is often the result. We are so used to people assuming things about us and being defensive because of it, that we assume this is part of communicating. Really good communications is moving beyond the moment and the surprise.

(John 4:10-15) Then we have some dialogue. Jesus is trying to engage her in a meaningful conversation and she tries to deflect it or re-channel it. Jesus wants to talk about living water. She tries to deflect this to a discussion about Jacob who dug the well. The Samaritans saw themselves as descendants of Jacob. They felt their temple was of equal importance to the temple of Jerusalem. Jesus wants to engage her about what will give her life and she wants to dig up the old feud. It was a blocking technique. But Jesus won't be deflected. He keeps going back to his message until she finally says, "Give me this water." I am sure she didn't know exactly what receiving this water would mean. A cynical view is that she didn't want to come to the well any more. But as we will see, she began to understand that this man talking to her was offering her respect, value and, yes, new life. She was beginning to be changed by the conversation.

When we begin to talk deeply we often find people trying to deflect us by changing the subject, by changing the intent or all sorts of other things. We have all had

those times where we are trying to say something of importance to another and they are not hearing us. They respond in different ways than we expect, refuse to hear what we say and change the subject. The easy response is to get mad at them. Or to allow ourselves to be diverted and we end up having a conversation about something entirely different than what we wanted to talk about. Sometimes this is o.k. because we can't always be in control of the conversation but sometimes it is a tool used to divert us from the purpose of our conversation.

I recall having such a dialogue. I was talking to a college student. He had mentioned to our college minister that he was really struggling with his studies. At the weekly college gathering I happened to have a moment to talk to him alone. I said, "I hear school is really tough." He sighed and then said, "Do you still need ushers for Sunday?" Deflection. Jesus reminds us that this often happens and we need to be true to the purpose of our talking, not get sidetracked and really engage until we are heard. With the young man I said, "Let's not worry about ushers but about how you are doing in school." Then he poured out all of his troubles. Real conversation is willing to be engaged, to listen, to dialogue even when it is difficult.

(John 4:16-18) Jesus, in talking about her husband, was trying to get to the reason she needed living water, the reason she was at the well at noon. Once people know you are listening and won't be diverted they are ready to talk about deep things.

(John 4:17-26) But they are not ready to talk right away. We are so afraid of meaningful conversations. Again we see this with her trying a bit of diversion, trying to get him to unhook from a conversation that had gotten very difficult. Jesus doesn't allow the deflection and they end up having one of the deepest theological conversations in the Bible. He talks about true worship which gets her to talking about the hope of all the people in the region, Samaritan or Jew, of a Messiah. And then we have the dramatic proclamation, "I am the one."

When we finally talk about deep things it is empowering. Too often we are happy to stay with what I call surface level conversations. They are emotionally safe, rarely challenging and rarely life giving. We can have these types of conversations with people

frequently and never really communicate. We all have those people in our lives where this is our level of conversations. Some might be right here at church. You see them every week and your conversation is about the weather, where to go for lunch, what your grandkids are doing and maybe the hot news topic of the week. This is talking and not communicating.

Deep conversations happen when you talk about hopes and fears, challenges and expectations. They happen when you talk about the whys of your life, why you believe that way, why you treat people the way you do. These are risky kinds of conversations. They make us vulnerable. They are hard to have as the story of Jesus and the woman at the well shows. But when you are fully present, asking, listening and not being diverted they can and often do occur and they make a huge difference.

(John 4:27-30) It ends with the woman running into the village, a place she was not welcomed and proclaiming that the Messiah might be at the door. She was transformed. I see this kind of transformational kind of thing happen. As a minister I am given the permission to ask deep questions. People will tell me about what is going on medically in their lives. When I ask, "And how does that make you feel?" I usually get a lot of deflection, at first. But then as they finally begin to open up that closed place I hear about fear, anger, and disappointment. They are usually embarrassed at first to admit to those feelings. When they are reminded that these are normal and expected, you begin to see a freedom moving in and through them. Often, without prompting, they begin to have these same deep conversations with family members because they realize that it is important.

Jesus shows us how to have important conversations. We need to see and accept people for who they are and where they are in their life journey. We need to engage and listen. We need to talk deeply, not be deflected into side issues or surface issues. We need to respond to what we hear. This is what leads to all good conversation and it is life changing.