

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury
Sermon – February 27, 2005
“Everything I Have Ever Done”

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I'd like to begin this sermon reciting a famous poem by Langston Hughes called 'Mother to Son.' You can picture a tired woman sitting on the steps of her home in Harlem, New York sharing a bit of wisdom with her child.

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now –
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

I thought of this poem when I read again the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well. The Samaritan woman could have written that poem. Life for her had been no crystal stair.

The men in her village took advantage of her. The women shied away from her. She had no friend with whom to draw water from the village well. She seems to have no standing in the community. Only an outcast would be at the well drawing water in the heat of the day. Though she is down on her luck, she is a survivor. She plods along doing what she has to do. Life for her had been no crystal stair.

Into this woman's life comes Jesus of Nazareth. Unlike the other men in her village who deride her and devalue her and see her as an object of sexual gratification, Jesus sees her as a human being, as a daughter of God whose life has worth and who deserves to be treated with dignity.

Unlike the other villagers who avoid her like the plague, Jesus walks right up to her, engages her in conversation, looks her in the eye, chooses to see the divine in her. Unlike those who have abandoned her, Jesus embraces her. Unlike those who try to get something from her, Jesus offers her what he has.

She has never met anyone like this before. It's as if she is being loved for the very first time in her life. Others find out about her past and reject her. Others find out about her secrets and shun her. Jesus uncovers her past and accepts her just as she is. Jesus uncovers all her torrid secrets and affirms her just as she is. No one has ever loved her in this way. Others have judged her and condemned her. Jesus only has love for her.

She doesn't know what to make of it. She doesn't know what to say or how to behave. She is not prepared to respond to this kind of love. Nothing in her life to that moment had prepared her for such a profound joy. All she can think to do is to run as fast as she can back to her village where she says to everyone she meets,

“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

My paraphrase of that text would sound like this: Come and meet a man who sees right through all the masks I wear, who sees through my makeup, my outward appearances, who sees me just as I am and loves me just as I am. This woman is profoundly happy. I picture this woman doing a Snoopy dance! She has tasted the sweetness of God's salvation and her very first impulse is to invite her neighbors to come and experience the Savior for themselves. She has no interest in keeping this revelation a secret. Though her neighbors have been mean to her, she doesn't even consider withholding from them what she knows. Her question, 'He can not be the Messiah, can he?' is really a rhetorical question. It isn't even a question at all. It is a statement. It is a pronouncement. She now knows in her heart what it means to be forgiven, what it means to have a redeeming encounter with the Messiah, what it means to tell someone all the gory details of your past and discover that this person embraces you with unconditional love. She doesn't need anyone to answer her question for her. She has the answer!

She has been waiting for a very long time. Life ain't been no crystal stair. But now her past can be left in the past. She need not carry her burden another step. She has lain her burden down.

In a way, we can all relate to the woman at the well. We have all found ourselves utterly alone and feeling abandoned.

I finished high school in 1965. I say 'finished' because I didn't exactly graduate. When you go through that ceremony where they read out your name and shake your hand and present you with a diploma, you find your way back to your seat and sneak a peek inside to be sure the document has been signed by the school principal.

On June 6, 1965, I made that round trip journey up to the front of the auditorium, received the diploma and the handshake and sat back down. I took the proverbial peek inside. No signature! No authorization! No graduation. It was one of those moments you dread but assume will never happen to you. It is the one experience in my life that comes closest to letting me feel the feelings of the Samaritan woman as she ventured alone and rejected to draw water from the village well. I was feeling that alone and that rejected.

One month ago, nearly forty years later, I returned to my high school. I told the principal my entire story, the events leading up to the graduation ceremony and the events of my life since that day. He reached out his hand to me and he presented me with a signed diploma. Here it is! I didn't walk out of that office. I danced out of that office. I think it was a Snoopy dance. It was as if I had met a man who had told me everything I had ever done and welcomed me anyway. There were goose bumps from head to toe. I know the principal of my high school is not the Savior, but on that day he did a saving thing. He met me at the well. And for that saving thing, I am forever grateful.

It's a risky thing when there is someone out there who knows everything you've ever done. That person can use it against you. They can blackmail you. They can manipulate you. They can write an uncomplimentary biography of you. Or, that person can love you all the more. This takes us to the essence of the Gospel. The one from Nazareth, the Christ, tells us everything we've ever done, and then says, "Come into the circle of God's steadfast love."

That is how the text was speaking to me these past few days. In the greatest of hope, Amen!