

TITLE: "Pumpkins to Jack-o-Lanterns"

TEXT: John 4:1-42 (NT pp. 94-95)

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, 'Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John'—² although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—³ he left Judea and started back to Galilee. ⁴But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'.
⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.'

¹¹The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?' ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?'

¹³Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' ¹⁵The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.'

¹⁷The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!'

¹⁹The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.'

²¹Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.'

²⁵The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.'

²⁶Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

²⁷Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?'

²⁸Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' ³²But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' ³³So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?'

³⁴Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." ³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.'

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.'

Introduction – pumpkins and jack-o-lanterns

Someone has said that being a Christian is like being a jack-o-lantern. God lifts you up like a pumpkin, takes you in and washes all the dirt off of you. He opens you up, touches you deep inside, and scoops out all the yucky stuff-- including the seeds of hatred, greed, judgmentalism, injustice, etc. Then He carves you a new smiling face and puts His light inside you to shine for all the world to see.

I became a pastor because in my years working in business, I realized that the world was filled with pumpkins. They were people who WANTED to change their destructive lifestyles but simply couldn't on their own. Since Jesus was in the process of making a jack-o-lantern out of me, I knew that Jesus could do it for others. And that was, and still is, the goal of my life.

Let's see how this process worked out in the life of the woman Jesus met at the well.

1. The pumpkin

In the text, the disciples were surprised that Jesus was talking to a woman. In that culture, Jewish men did not even speak to JEWISH women they did not already know. Jewish men never spoke to Samaritans because they were considered utter heathens. No wonder the disciples were amazed to find Jesus speaking to a Samaritan woman.

Who WAS this woman? She was living with a man with whom she was not married, which was unacceptable in that culture. The other village women came to draw water early in the morning when it was cool. She was there in the heat of the noonday sun, in order to avoid the scorn of the other ladies of the village.

Her only security was the man with whom she lived. How secure WAS that relationship? Well, she had had five relationships and this was her sixth. ...Perhaps she was a woman who loved too much. There is a book titled *Women Who Love Too Much* by Robin Norwood. She writes about women who find their identity in a relationship with a man. Unfortunately, women who love too much often choose a man who cannot return their love and they wind up giving until they burn out and then get "dumped" by the one they loved too much.

God wants each person to have her or his own personal identity and God wants each of us to be secure in our identity. Years ago I met with a young couple who planned to marry. It became obvious that he was controlling, manipulative and emotionally abusive. When she was alone one day, I asked if he was physically abusive and she said, "Sometimes, but I'm sure that will stop when we're married."

To make a long story short, I told her that it far more likely that he would get MORE abusive as time went by and I urged her to reconsider the relationship. She did and they broke up. Hard as it was for her at the time, she eventually met a nice guy who was happy to encourage her to be the wonderful person she was.

There is only one person for whom we can sacrifice our identity and come out more and more the person we were created to be. That person is Jesus Christ. That is why Jesus can say: "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Mt. 10:39). We find ourselves as we lose ourselves in Jesus.

Before I became a Christian, this made NO sense at all to me. And it probably doesn't to all pumpkins who don't know the Lord. But when you DO give your life to Jesus, you give it to the One who created you; the One who wants you to be the best and most wonderful person you can be. Some people NEVER find out who they really are, but you WILL find yourself as you lose yourself in Jesus.

2. Putting the light in the jack-o-lantern

I DO have one problem with the analogy of the jack-o-lantern and it has to do with the sequence of steps from pumpkin to jack-o-lantern: first pumpkin, then cleaning out, then carving and putting the light inside. There are Christians who believe that when you accept Jesus as Savior, God DOES clean up your life all at once and THEN God puts his light, the presence of Jesus, in you so you can shine for all the world to see.

I disagree, and that is why I have moved away from the Fundamentalists as years have passed. I believe that when we accept Jesus as our Savior, God puts the light in us, the presence of Jesus, and THEN the clean up begins. And I believe that the transformation from the pumpkin to the jack-o-lantern is a PROCESS, a process that will not be completed until we die and go to be with the Lord in heaven.

God putting the light inside us is what Jesus meant when he says:

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a bushel basket, but on a lamp stand so it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven" (Mt 5:14-16).

If we were perfect, people would be attracted to US and that is not the point. We are to be a light to the world, not so people will be drawn to us, but so that people will be drawn to the Light that is WITHIN us, which is Jesus Christ.

This is exactly what the woman at the well did. As far as we know, she did not clean up her life and yet she went back to the village and told everyone that she had met the Messiah and because of her, many people came out to meet Jesus.

3. The cleaning out

Now we come to process of cleaning out the pumpkin. When they met, Jesus knew all about the woman at the well. How? Jesus said, “and the father ore One, so God gave Jesus tremendous insight into people and situations. So Jesus knew that she was a social outcast and why she was. However, Jesus did not tell her to clean up her life right away.

We, as Christians, need to be aware of this and try hard not to judge those who are not Christians. Jesus is very insistent about this. In the Sermon on the Mount, says:

“Do not judge so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Mt. 7:1,2).

This is scary to me. If I judge the lifestyles of people who do not know Jesus, God will judge me by the same measure. I don't know about you, but I would be in a heap of trouble, so I try my best NOT to judge others.

What does this mean for us here this morning? Well, it's a little like fishing. Jesus says, “You CATCH the fish, I'LL clean 'em.” When we imagine people we would like to be part of our church family, we may be tempted to want fish that are already cleaned; jack-o-lanterns rather than pumpkins. That is not what Jesus tells us to do. Jesus said that he came to call the sick, not those who are well. We are called to do the same.

So don't be surprised if God brings pumpkins into your life. Jesus was called to seek the pumpkins NOT the jack-o-lanterns and Jesus calls us to do the same.

Conclusion – A spring of water gushing up to eternal life

Today is All Saints day and I want to talk about eternal life for a moment. Jesus talks about this in the text when he says to the woman, “The water that I will give will become in [you] a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” But first I want to talk about getting older. What I have discovered is that getting older is like a child's security blanket.

When a child gets too old for a security blanket, a parent can take and cut it in half. After a while, you can cut in half again and again. It's surprising, but the child rarely realizes the diminished size, I guess because it's the security he or she feels rather than the blanket itself.

This is a little how it feels to get older. You can do half of what you used to do, then half again (and it hurts twice as much), then half again. That's certainly the way it is for my memory. I can remember about half as well as I used to, at least I think I can..... Anyway, the following comes from the book *Dave Barry Turns 50* by, of course, Dave Barry (whose father is a Presbyterian minister by the way).

...When you turn 50, you find yourself thinking more about death, because more and more people your own age are—as William Shakespeare so poetically expressed it—'shuffling off this mortal coil and kicking the bucket.' When you bump into people you haven't seen for a while, you find yourself having conversations like this:

OTHER PERSON: Did you hear about Bob Frumbish?

YOU: No! What happened?

He died!

No!

Yes! He took his grandson to a petting zoo, and he just keeled over! Onto a small goat! He was dead before he hit the ground!

The goat?

No, Bob.

I can't believe it! *Bob Frumbish*.

I know!

YOU (*after thinking about it for a moment*): Which one is Bob Frumbish again?

OTHER PERSON: You know! He's the one who...At least I *think* this was him...The one who, remember, he was in the Drama Club at Saint Emmet's, and during the rumble number in *West Side Story* he was a Jet, and he threw up on the Sharks?

Saint Emmets?

You know...Saint Emmet's Academy for Unusually Sweaty Children. Didn't you go there?

No.

Well, aren't you Norm...uh...Norm...Geez, I can't remember your last name.

Whirewhacker

No, that's not it.

No, I'm saying *my* last name is Wirewhacker. My name is Ted Wirewhacker.

I don't know any Ted Wirewhacker...*Wait* a minute. If you're not Norm, how do you know Bob?

Bob who?

Like a security blanket, our memory, our physical ability, our ability to stay up late or to sleep in late, gets cut in half, then cut in half again ...and again. A while ago I saw a child who was holding a small ball of fuzz tightly in his hand. His mother told me, "That's all that is left of his little blanket." I guess when the ball of fuzz is finally gone, our life on earth is over.

My question this morning is: "Where do the other halves go? Are they lost forever? No. And here's the good news. If we allow God to lift us up like a pumpkin; wash all the dirt off of us; open us up; touch us deep inside and scoop out all the yucky stuff-- including the seeds of hate, greed, injustice, judgmentalism; and then carve a new smiling face and put His light inside us to shine for all the world to see. ...Our whole selves will be resurrected and our lights will shine forever and ever and ever. ...Amen.