

Making Good Choices (John 4:5-52)

I remember my senior year of high school. It was in the spring, and we were staring into the face of the future, graduation on the near horizon—which, as I said last week, was a pretty anxiety-producing eventuality. So, a bunch of us decided one particular Friday to pitch tents on the front lawn of the high school and camp out. I don't know. There were probably forty of us doing whatever goofy things 18-year-old kids do when they get a little taste of freedom mixed with a dash of rebellion.

My brother and his friends, who were all sophomores, thought they'd have a little fun at our expense. So, unbeknownst to us, 10 or 11 of them went around behind the school, climbed up, and got on the roof. They brought along a bunch of water balloons and what we called a "funnelator,"—which consisted of two bicycle tire inner tubes tied on either side to a giant funnel.

You'd put a water balloon in the funnel and have two guys each hold one end of their inner tubes, while a third guy would take the funnel and the water balloon and start walking backward—like a really big slingshot. And if everyone were strong enough, you could stretch that thing a long way, and it'd shoot a water balloon a pretty fair distance.

So, my brother and his friends were getting ready to rain on our little parade—so to speak. And just as they were going to let loose, a police car showed up behind the school and flashed its lights.

To this day, I don't know why they didn't just run. I mean, surely, if they'd all just split up, most of them could have gotten away without getting caught. But they dropped the funnelator and stood on the roof's edge looking down, like sheep peering into some great chasm.

Officer Colvin rounded them all up and took them to jail.

Yeah, jail. I know, right?

Which was pretty much the response when my dad got a phone call from the Grandville police department, telling him he could come down to the station to bail out his sixteen-year-old future minister son.

So, my dad got in the car. But instead of going straight to the police station, he came to the high school and picked me up.

I was surprised to see him since I had no idea that my brother and his friends had even been at the high school—much less arrested on aggravated-water-balloon charges.

I'm not sure why he thought **I** should be there for the shaming of my juvenile delinquent brother. On the other hand, maybe he was trying to make a point with me to think seriously about my future and the possible harm I could do to it if I ever got off the straight

and narrow and started hanging out with people of questionable character embracing membership in some kind of rogue water balloon gang roaming the mean streets of Grandville, Michigan: "Take a good look. This is where messing around with bicycle inner tubes and funnels ultimately leads."

Maybe he was trying to make a point for my brother, Daren: "See this, even your idiot big brother—who's never really demonstrated a great deal of good sense—knows better than this. We had all our hopes pinned on you, and now this. Your mother and I are so disappointed in you."

Or maybe he just thought that the Penwell family had experienced enough excitement for one night, and all he wanted to do was get everyone back under the same roof so he could go to bed in peace.

Well, we bailed him out, saving him from a frightful stretch of hard time in the big house, and took him home. But our family

still bears the social stigma of harboring a water balloon terrorist among our ranks.

It's tough growing up. Doing, saying things that probably aren't the wisest choices.

One of the most important things about growing up is learning how to make good choices. According to modern neuroscience, we now know that the area of the brain that handles executive function—things like planning, organization, mood modulation, and judgment—are undergoing significant change in adolescents as their brains develop.

The little person in their heads that ... you know, the wrinkled fussbudget who always seems to be throat-clearing and *ahem-ing* in an attempt to point out that maybe becoming water balloon terrorists is a dead-end road that will lead you to a life spent in the captivating company of guys with face tattoos and names like Mouse and Ice Box.

So, often, making good choices is precisely what teenagers are ***incapable*** of doing. But it's the way things are. Sleeping into the afternoon, mood swings, and haircuts their kids will mock them for in twenty years—it's the way they're built.

Part of how we define adulthood, in fact, is reaching that point in life where the prefrontal cortex finally crosses the threshold where making good choices is the norm and not just an occasional lucky occurrence.

So, you'd think Jesus—now in his thirties in our text—would be better at it than he apparently is. People have undoubtedly told him his whole life whom he's supposed to hang out with and whom he's supposed to avoid. But he's just not very adept at making good choices.

I mean, take a look at our Gospel for today. First bad choice: Jesus takes a shortcut into Samaria on his way back to Galilee.

Now, ***he knew better than this***. Samaritans aren't the kind of people Jesus was raised to fraternize with. Common knowledge. Everybody knows that.

Samaritans are the distant cousins that nobody brings up at family reunions—the ones who watch the wrong cable news channel, go to the wrong church, and vote for the wrong party in every election. Ah, I see you have them too.

The Samaritans had been written out of the will a long time ago because of their boorish behavior. So if one of them should happen by the house, you're not supposed to let them in—and if, God forbid, they do get in, you'd better keep an eye on the silverware.

But Jesus is bad at following directions, so he detours into Samaria.

Second bad choice: He starts a conversation with a woman at the well.

This is before Gloria Steinem or the #MeToo movement, ok? So he **knows** better than to enter into social interactions with women who are not family members ... especially in public.

Women, like children, were supposed to be seen and not heard. Not a lot of gray area on this one. No long discussions necessary to interpret the circumstances. Easy—just stay in the house and mind the chores.

So, to recap: Jesus has not only taken a shortcut through the wrong side of town, he's struck up a conversation with a woman—which is expressly forbidden in his culture by the general rules of good etiquette. But, as if to pour salted lime juice on the festering social scab, she's not only a **woman** ... she's a **Samaritan** woman.

Come on, man!

Look at how his disciples respond. The text says, “They were astonished that he was speaking to a woman.”

I’ll bet “astonished” was the **kind** way of saying it. They were **mortified, outraged**. Reflexively, they started looking around, seeing if anybody had a phone out, chronicling this social fiasco for YouTube—or maybe Officer Colvin was lurking about after successfully rounding up another mob of water balloon miscreants.

Shooting each other furious glances, muttering under their breath, “Man, you **literally** cannot take this guy anywhere.”

Making good choices. Just about everybody with any sense is part of the consensus—Jesus seems **incapable** of making good choices.

Now, let me pause here for a second to make another comment about this story—just what you were hoping I’d do, right? Offer more commentary.

If you read the commentators, the temptation is to paint this woman as loose. Am I right?

Jesus says, “Go call your husband.”

She says, “Um, I don’t have a husband at the moment.”

Jesus says, “Well, that’s true; you **don’t** have a husband. Turns out you’ve had **five** husbands, and at the moment, you happen to be living with another guy.”

Now, to many commentators, this woman’s supposed immorality is the final piece of the puzzle, proving what a horrible human being she is. A Samaritan woman with questionable morals.

Loose. You know all the colorful names we've dreamed up to feel superior to women who've had five husbands.

And playing up her immorality is supposed to make Jesus look even **more** super-heroically merciful in talking to her.

"Look at the nice Jesus man, being all forgiving of that shameless woman. What an amazingly compassionate guy. And he's going to need it in this evil world—not for me, of course, but there are a lotta bad people roaming around—and a few officer Colvins to boot."

But the thing of it is, if you look closely, her morality doesn't come into the story at all—at least not through Jesus. Notice Jesus doesn't **scold** her, doesn't call her out as a serial monogamist, doesn't say, "Go and sin no more."

Traditionally, people have assumed that this woman has had so many husbands because she has a wandering eye. It's **her** fault.

She's brought her situation on **herself**, making **all** the bad choices.

What if the fact that this woman has had five husbands and at least one steady boyfriend has nothing to **do** with her moral deficiencies?

What if it's the **husbands** who've all been deadbeats and lechers? Generally speaking, divorce in that culture was no-fault for men ... and pretty much **all**-fault for women.

It doesn't make her a more acceptable conversation partner for Jesus—at least from the standpoint of social etiquette. But it certainly helps us to see Jesus' choice to speak with her in a different light, doesn't it?

If the husband-thing isn't her fault, then Jesus isn't just taking pity on a poor sinner. Instead, his decision to engage with this woman sets the tone for the kind of people the reign of God is

meant to look **out** for—even if, to most folk’s way of thinking, it continues Jesus’ string of bad choices.

Think about it: Jesus goes to a place no respectable Jew is supposed to go to talk to a Samaritan woman to whom no respectable Jew is supposed to even talk.

And this isn’t just **any** unsavory Samaritan woman either. No. She’s at the very bottom of the social heap—a Samaritan woman whose domestic life has been epically, unthinkably, impossibly unstable. John wants us to know that she’s the first-century Guinness Book of World Record holder for powerlessness. Status doesn’t get any worse than this woman standing at the well.

Jesus, incapable of making good choices, goes out of his way to have an encounter with the last person on the earth he should be talking to—a woman whose own culture had rendered her an outcast.

But that's Jesus, isn't it? You can't take him anywhere because he's got really bad social instincts. He spends all his time talking to, eating with, and hanging around the wrong **people**.

He could have played it safe—you know, suck up to the religious bigwigs, make friends with the influential political high-rollers. But instead, he seeks out the last, the least, and the lost—because he's not interested in establishing some kind of stable empire where everybody has to come and kiss his ring because he's so important.

But instead, he drops any ambitions he might have had about being a big shot, walks down the first dark alley he sees, and starts having theological discussions with the invisible folks everybody else would just as soon forget.

But when Jesus ventures down dark alleys looking for those who creep around the edges, he redefines the **edges** so that the

margins are set in the **center**; and it's the folks who usually occupy the **center** who risk finding themselves on the margins.

Once again, Jesus turns the world on its head. The last shall be first, and the first shall be last. The one who wants to find life must first lose it. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. The one who wants to gain the world must forfeit everything.

"But Jesus, that doesn't make sense; you've got to make good choices. You need to put your money on a winner, get a good return on your investment, ride the middle of the road."

And Jesus says, "Life's much more interesting out here with the folks on the edges."

You don't believe me? Ask **them**. Ask those folks who—because society's told them repeatedly that they're not worth the effort—what it means for Jesus to go out of his way to reach out a

hand, to risk the bad opinion of the VIPs who occupy the center. Ask the forgotten people whether somebody finally willing to go looking for **them** means anything.

I'm going to be honest with you: You start making bad choices like Jesus, and it's going to cost you—your time, your money, and your reputation. Heck, it might cost you your job, your family, or even your life.

But there's a woman on what other people consider the wrong side of town, down a dark alley, standing by a well. She's waiting for someone finally—after all these years—to go out of their way for **her**.

Who knows? I've been around the block a few times and seen a lot of despair. Maybe she's waiting for you.

—Amen.