

In Spirit and In Truth

By David Chandler

I would like to start with a passage of scripture (John 4) that tells of Jesus talking with a woman by a well in Samaria. After some initial conversation she says,

"Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ... But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

The Samaritans and Jews were from related clans, but they had rival religions. The Samaritans had a temple on Mt. Gerizim, and the Jews had their temple at Jerusalem. Each thought theirs was the only "true" temple of God. Today the rivalries are different. People aren't arguing about where the one true temple of God may be. But still, there are a lot of people, whether Baptists, Catholics, Mormons, Moslems, you name it, whose main ambition is to get other people to worship or think their way. Jesus' reply to the Samaritan woman applies to people of all religions today. In essence he is saying, "Look beyond the traditions and doctrines of your religion and make your life an act of worship of the living God."

I would like to tell you about an experience I had in India. As some of you know, I was born in India where my parents were missionaries. From age two I was raised in the United States, but in 1973 I went back for two years to teach at Kodaikanal School in the mountains of South India. The faculty and students did a lot of hiking because we were in a beautiful area and there was no TV. One hike I will never forget was to the town of Palni on the plains 6000 feet below. The hike from the school to Palni was over 35 miles. It was all down hill, but as we went down the mountain we came into very hot, muggy weather. The school employed a couple of Indian men as drivers for the school vans. This hike was to be one way, so one of the drivers met us at the bottom of the mountain. At the park where we ended the hike there was a scrawny looking couple with an obviously undernourished infant. As we passed they put their hands out to beg.

Anybody who lives in India for any length of time learns to cope with beggars. Some of the first Tamil I learned was how to say, "No, go away!" Begging is a way of life for some people. It's a profession. Beggars aren't necessarily poverty stricken, by Indian standards at least. It's just the way some people make their living. On the other hand, it is frequently the case that the "truly needy" don't beg. It violates their sense of self respect. In any case, beggars are a fact of life, and you have to establish some kind of policy you can live with to keep yourself from being hounded to death.

As we were eating lunch, our driver went over to talk with the couple. Then he came around and asked each of us to give something from our lunch. He said the baby was sick and the parents hadn't eaten for several days. All I had left was my orange. I had been saving it for last. I was out of water and I was thirsty. After a 35 mile hike and a long hot drive ahead of us you can imagine how much I wanted that orange. Yet I felt pressured into giving it up. Why these beggars? Why

not some other beggars some other time? We couldn't feed every beggar that came along, hungry or not. I didn't say anything. I just handed over my orange reluctantly. When the driver had gathered up all the food he took it to the couple. Then he blew my mind: he took out his own wallet and gave them an amount of money that was, for him, over a week's wages.

I have never felt so guilty in all my life. Had I valued my orange more than the life of a child? Granted, an orange wouldn't go very far, and granted, there were a lot of hungry children. The point is I was unwilling to sacrifice even so much as an orange when confronted with starvation before my very eyes.

There were plenty of ways I could rationalize my actions. The driver, after all, was in a better position to find out the nature of the problem. He could speak their language. It would have been hard for me to distinguish between a professional beggar and a truly starving person. That's not entirely true, because anybody could see these people were in bad shape. That excuse would be a cop out anyway, because even after the driver took the initiative I was reluctant to let go of my orange. It was the generosity of the driver that put me to shame. Even if I had known the language would I have taken the initiative as he did?

There are so many hungry people in India. Nothing I could do would change that. Yet when you are confronted face to face with a person in need how do you respond? Our driver certainly knew the extent of poverty in India, but that did not immobilize him. He was willing to face the one situation before him and realize that he could indeed do something to help. My actions that day remind me of a cartoon I once saw where there was a whole sea of people stretched out to the horizon, each one thinking silently to himself, "What can one man do?"

The starving family got my orange that day, but what would it have meant to me if I had offered it freely, not waiting to be pressured into giving it up? There are other occasions where I have responded positively to needs of a similar nature, so I don't have to guess. Such an act binds you to that person. Giving breaks down the wall of insulation and allows you to care. In giving you make an investment in a person, and as the scripture says, "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." You can't care while you withhold your help.

Giving and caring are acts of worship that cross over all doctrinal boundaries. Jesus had a way of making Samaritans, Roman soldiers, prostitutes, lepers, and other outcasts the heroes of his stories, rather than recognizably religious people. I think his point is that an act of love can't be recognized as a secular act of love or a religious act of love. An act of love is a pure act of worship.

Where does this leave us. We are not in India, after all. (I am sure many of you would add, "Thank goodness.") I am sure for a lot of you India doesn't even exist. Actually, India is only a day away. It's literally just over the hill. It's as real to me as your home town is to you. I could have stood up here and told you the troubles of South Pomona and concluded with the comforting words that we are not in South Pomona, after all, thank goodness. South Pomona could be as far away as India, as far as most of us are concerned. (Some people wish it were!) The problem is not distance. The problem is when it comes to other people's suffering we distance ourselves. We suffer from self imposed blindness. We must learn to give. But giving is hard, especially for those of us who have

never felt deprivation. The scripture says it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Maybe that was part of the difference between our Indian driver and me.

I want to end with one more selection from the scriptures. The setting is the heavenly court. Whether you take it literally or not doesn't matter. The real message is very much down to earth in the here and now.

"Then the King will say to those on his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'"

May we learn to worship God in spirit and truth.