

# Two Tombstones

## Frankton – 3/1/15

Scripture: John 4

Proposition: Jesus takes away the insignificance that the world gives us.

*Fill My Cup Lord: Chorus Only*

I want to start by mentioning a tombstone in the Locke Hill cemetery in Dallas, Texas. In that cemetery stands the tombstone of one of the women of our two-woman sermon for today. Grace Llewellen Smith is buried in that cemetery under an old stone. It's faded and worn with age. But, even in its prime, it wasn't one of those really beautiful and ornate stones. It was quite gray and quite non-descript. There is no date of birth listed, probably because people didn't know what it was. But there is also no date of death carved into the stone. That may not have been known either, but I think that has to be because people didn't care; to others she was insignificant. Her own birth and death years weren't noted, but the names of her two husbands were. And also there is the following epitaph: *Loved, but was loved not. Tried to please, but pleased not. Died as she lived – alone.*

I'm one of those who believe that you should live your life according to the words that you want engraved on your tombstone – I call that Tombstone Theology. Some of you women may want the words: the best mom ever. Some of you men may want: provided well for his family. The weekend golfer wants: I just kept swinging. There's the tombstone in the Cipio, IN, cemetery that has two parking meters on either side of it with the word "expired" showing through the glass. There's the hypochondriac's tombstone which reads: I told you I was sick. I wonder if Grace Smith lived her life like those words. I wonder if Grace Smith chose those engraved lines for her tombstone or if she had just lived them. I wonder if she deserved the pain they betrayed in her life. I wonder if she was bitter or beaten by the men in her life. I wonder if she was a plain Jane or a blonde bombshell. I wonder why sometimes people live such fruitful lives while others are relegated to live a life with such apparent futility as Grace, because these are words of futility.

*Loved but was loved not....* She probably lived through lots of long, lonely nights as well as lots of long lonely days. She probably suffered through silence in the market and wherever else she went. And she probably suffered through silence in the home. Her two marriages couldn't have been the best of marriages or why else would these words be written. One husband could have been a callous man who was married to his work. The other one could have been unfaithful to his vows that he shouldn't have taken in the first place. She lived a life where no love was exchanged for any love she gave. *She Loved, but was loved not....*

*Tried to please, but pleased not....* I can hear her heart breaking with every chop of the hatchet of disappointment in her life. As a child she probably heard, "You'll never amount to anything!" Chop! "How many times do I have to tell you?" Chop, chop! "Can't you see that I'm busy?" Chop, chop, chop! Those words probably didn't stop flying toward her as she lived her adult life. "You've really let yourself go!" Chop. "Why can't you do anything right?" Chop, chop! "I don't love you anymore!" Chop, chop, chop! Imagine being in her world, a world where you can do

nothing right and so everyone that you care for is disappointed in you or mad at you and so you felt like you let everyone down. *Tried to please, but pleased not....*

*Died as she lived – alone....* This may be the hardest one of all. After she spent her entire life deprived of the loved that each of us deserves, she makes the great journey between now and forever all alone. There was no one to hold her hand as she passed away. There was no one to sing to her as she made the final steps into the land beyond. There was no one to be with her as she crossed the river of life and waded on to the shore of death. It's interesting to me that she died alone. When I was a chaplain at St. Vincent's, I had the honor to watch as a homeless man passed from life to death. Even though he was homeless, he wasn't alone – I was there, as was a nurse and, most importantly, one of his homeless friends was with us also. But not Grace; she *Died as she lived – alone....*

How many Grace Llewellen Smiths are there in our world? How many people will die in the loneliness in which they are living? How many will die and no one will know or care? Homeless men in Indianapolis. The bag lady in Miami. The AIDS victim in San Francisco. The happy-hour bar hopper in Hollywood. The dooper on the streets of New York. The migrant worker in the fields of Elwood. Any person who doubts whether the world needs him. Any person who is convinced that no one really cares. Any person who has been given a wedding ring, but not their mate's heart, been given criticism but never a chance, been given a bed but never rest. These are all victims of futility. And unless someone intervenes, unless something happens, their epitaph will match Grace Smith's epitaph: *Died as she lived – alone....*

That's why, to me at least, the story we read this morning from John is so significant. It's the story of yet another tombstone. This time, however, the tombstone doesn't mark the death of a person – it marks their birth. This is the story of Jesus giving birth to one of those that society lets die alone. I know, I know. Jesus never gave birth and you can't seem to remember any tombstone in this morning's story. Just sit back and listen and by the time I'm done, I hope you will understand.

Let's look at the second woman of our two woman sermon. Her shoulders stoop under the weight of the empty jar she is carrying. Her feet trudge on, one after another, on this twice daily task of going to the well and drawing water. Every step stirs up a little dust cloud at her feet. Her eyes are squinting against the noontime sun. And not only that, she has her head bowed so that she can avoid the stares of anyone she comes into contact with on her journey. And she desperately wants to avoid anyone she might meet. That's why she's coming at noon. Most of the women come to the well in the early morning and at dusk, avoiding the heat of the day. This woman comes during the heat of the day, willingly carrying her heavy load during the heat of the day, to avoid the other women. You see, she's been married five times. That's more than Grace Smith of my earlier story.

She desperately wants to avoid the other women. She can hardly take their snide comments and rude remarks spoken just loud enough for her to hear. "Have you heard? She's got a new man." "They say she'll sleep with anyone." "She's just nothing but a tramp." "I can't understand what any man sees in her." And then the worst remark of all, "Shhh. Here she comes." This lonely woman is on her fifth husband and the other women think that gives them license to talk. So not only have five husbands rejected her (And that's the way it would have worked in the Ancient Near East), the women of the community reject her as well. So she comes to the well at noon hoping to avoid everyone.

But unfortunately, at least in her eyes, as she approaches the well with her eyes down and her shoulders stooped by the weight of her empty water jug, she sees a man reclining against the well, the very well her ancestor Jacob dug over a thousand years ago. He is sitting with his back against the well for support. She guesses that he has spent the morning traveling because of the amount of dust caked on his feet and also the weariness chiseled into his face. He has his eyes closed and fails to hear her as she approaches. She had hopes that he was sleeping and would sleep through her drawing some water for herself. But he awakens as she starts to draw the water. He looks at her, but she quickly looks away hoping that he will ignore her.

But he doesn't. He asks her if she could get him a drink of water. This man, who is obviously Jewish, speaks to her, a Samaritan woman. That's something that just wasn't done. There was this Anti-Samaritan thinking of the Israelites and the Anti-Israelite thinking in the Samaritans. So when he speaks to her, she thinks maybe that he wants more than just a drink, if you know what I mean. "Since when does a nice Jewish boy ask a Samaritan woman for water?" She wanted to know what he had in mind. You see, she was partly correct; he was interested in more than just a drink of water. He was also interested in her heart, too. So they continued to talk and she couldn't remember a time when a man had spoken to her with such respect. He told her about his spring of living water that would quench more than the parchiness of her throat, but the barrenness of her heart too. She didn't see any bucket that he carried where he could get any water, but she asked him for some anyway.

And here's where the conversation gets a little uncomfortable for her. This man asks her to go get her husband. Her heart must have sunk. Things were going so well. He was treating her with respect and dignity. And now he was asking about that...anything but that. She might have considered lying, saying that her husband was busy. She probably wanted to change the subject. She might have thought about just turning tail and getting out of Dodge. But she stayed and she told the truth. (Kindness has a way of inviting honesty) "I have no husband" she replies. She probably wondered what this man would do, whether his kindness would fly away like a kite whose string is broken by a gust of wind.

Jesus' answer is very important. "That's right. You have had five husbands and the man you are living with isn't one of them. He won't even marry you and give you his name. (Kind of dates the story doesn't it?) But there was no criticism, no harsh words, and no look-at-the-mess-you-have-gotten-yourself-into lecture. Unbeknownst to her, this man was seeking honesty rather than perfection. (And that's a lesson for all of us.) So they continued to talk and she is so shocked by his godliness and by his demeanor towards her that she wants to ask him a question. So she does, "Where is God? My people say he is on this mountain. Your people say he is in Jerusalem. Where is he?"

I'd give a thousand lifetimes to have seen the expression on Jesus' face when he heard the question. Could he contain his smile? Did his eyes dance? Did he look up into the blue sky and wink at Dad in the heavens? Here he was in Samaria, of all places, and he found a thirsty heart. Not for water, but for God. Of all the people to be thirsty – a Samaritan woman. Of all the Samaritan women – a five time divorcee. Of all the divorcees – one who is shacking up with yet another man? And of all the people chosen to personally receive the secret of the ages – an outcast among the outcasts, the most insignificant person in an insignificant region. This Samaritan, five-time divorcee who is shacking up with yet another man is the most insignificant person that Jesus could

have come across at that well. Yet he doesn't think she's insignificant. To him she's important enough to tell her the news story of the ages. "I am the Messiah. You don't have to wait any longer or look any further."

And in her exuberance, she turns to go tell the others and runs right smack into the chest of the big and burly Peter, who was with the rest of the disciples coming back with food for Jesus. She bounces off of him and heads into town with a great story to tell all those who she has tried so hard to avoid up until now. With one sentence, Jesus removed the stains of her life. He removed the disappointment of tattered romances. He removed the insignificance that had marked her life. In one moment all that insignificance had been swallowed by the significance of her moment with God. That's why she forgot her water jar. The very reason she went to the well in the first place was left behind, discarded, insignificant in the moment. It's the tombstone that marks the death of her insignificance and her birth of significance.

There are two tombstones in this sermon. The first is the lonely one in Locke Hill cemetery where the earthly remains of Grace Llewellyn Smith reside. She didn't know love. She didn't know gratification. She only knew the pain of the chisel as it carved the epitaph in her tombstone: *Loved, but was loved not. Tried to please, but pleased not. Died as she lived – alone.* But there is another tombstone in this sermon. The second is near the well that Jacob dug thousands of years ago. The tombstone on it is a discarded, suddenly forgotten water jug. It has no words on it, but it has great significance. It marks the spot of the burial place of insignificance. It marks where even the insignificant are considered significant by God.

*Fill My Cup Lord:* Chorus only