

## WHAT ABOUT QUALITY CONTROL?

JOHN 4:5-42

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St. Paul often uses the term “Stumbling Block” to describe the Gospel. He uses that word in 1 Cor. 1:23 and again in Gal 5:11. He uses the word in a different context in 1 Cor. 8:9 and again in Rom 14:13.

The Greek word for “Stumbling Block” is *σκανδαλον* (*skandalon*). That word might bring to mind an English word that we occasionally hear in association with politics.

Paul understood the Gospel to be scandalous. It has a mixture of hard words, ironies, challenges and paradoxes. It is composed of things that we don’t understand even though we pretend we do.

This may be a surprise to those of us who have been raised to think of the Gospel as a warm comfort in a cold world, or some common sense wisdom in an insane existence.

Robert Kysar in his book *The Scandal of Lent*, suggests that “unless one is scandalized by the gospel message, she or he can never embrace it with authentic faith.”

We so often want to turn the Christian faith into a pabulum that will not upset our stomachs or our lives; we so often want to remove the scandals of faith so that we will not be priced by the challenges and numbing power of God’s message.

We so often ignore, avoid or disregard the scandal of the gospel so that we might be free to take the Gospel on our own terms.

But when we avoid the scandal of the gospel, we also avoid the possibility of authentic faith. We cannot have authentic faith in the Gospel if we do not have an authentic gospel to have faith in!

When I was 20 years old, I got an application for an American Express Gold Card. I don’t remember what mailing list they bought to get my name but I remember looking over the requirements and thinking did they mess up good! You needed to have a huge income, own your home, work at your present job for at least two years. Here I was a university student with a negative income, a small rental apartment and never having worked for more than 4 months in the summertime in my life.

And so of course, I garbaged that piece of mail and decided to be content with my one Texaco credit card with a \$200 credit limit.

Of course the prestige factor in credit cards has worn off. Today, two weeks ago, Colette received a new MasterCard from Sears even though she didn’t apply for it in the first place; she cut it up and threw it out. Last week, the PIN number arrived for that card.

And we wonder why personal debt is becoming a national problem.

As a Project Manager, I had to endure a quality audit of one of my projects this past week. Did I follow the proper processes to ensure that we delivered a quality product to our client? I easily passed the audit.

But quality is one of those things that stick out for people. There are car dealerships and manufacturers that I will never do business with again because I haven’t been impressed with their quality. There’s a certain satisfaction when you buy a new pair of pants and reach in the pocket to find a slip of paper marked “INSPECTED

by Number 15". It gives a sense that the company cares about its customers.

Our Gospel story today is a touching story. Jesus shares who he is with a stranger—a Samaritan woman. It's a story that many of us have heard before. On the surface, it seems to be a nice story—one that all of us can say "Amen" to.

But on a deeper level—a level we don't like to recognize—it is scandalous story.

Jesus asks for a drink from a Samaritan woman. An editor tries to help us out by pointing out that "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans". In fact, Jews and Samaritans hated each other. Every year when the Jews from Galilee had to pass through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem, they would have stones thrown at them by the Samaritans coming out of their homes and villages. Samaritans and Jews were as loathsome to each other as Palestinians and Israelis are today.

But here we find Jesus not just talking to a woman—scandalous enough itself in an age where men and women did not even look at each other unless they were family—not even just talking to a Samaritan—but asking a Samaritan woman for a favour—a drink. How did he know that she wouldn't spit in his face, or call her neighbours out to taunt, heckle, abuse and beat him up?

Here we have a religious teacher spending time visiting a woman who has been divorced a number of times and is now living common-law. There is no one else around, no witnesses to their conversation; it is scandalous and shameful.

Our Gospel writer somehow knows the content of the story. Jesus is not just talking with this woman—not just offering some spiritual truths and advice, but is actually

inviting the woman to join him. "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."

Uh-oh, now he's done it!

As the story unfolds, we find Jesus and his followers staying in that Samaritan village for two more days. Jesus probably even stayed at the home of this woman and her live-in boyfriend—a further scandal to our sensibilities. Where is Jesus' sense of moral propriety? How can he condone such a lifestyle? How can he step outside of social customs and conventions like this?

The scandal comes for us when we realize that Jesus has no quality control. This woman would be a social outcast—even in our own time, yet Jesus not only accepts her but welcomes her. Unlike American Express, Jesus has no minimum entrance requirements. If respect comes from the company you keep, then Jesus deserves no respect from anyone.

This is our scandal—we want to set minimum standards on who we hang out with, who comes to our church, who we associate with. If we want to impose quality controls on who hears or receives the Gospel, then we are turning the Gospel into something that it is not. We cannot reject people and then try and say we are doing the will of God.

God tosses such standards onto the trash heap. God's love is meant for everyone. Ironically, usually those are the greatest risk and the most sinful that are most likely to receive and welcome his invitation.

Jesus risks everything to welcome people such as this Samaritan woman. That is a scandal that we will have to learn to live with.