

**KILLING ME SOFTLY**

**SONG:** *Killing Me Softly With His Song* by Roberta Flack

It's a POWERFUL song, isn't it? And, I ALWAYS think about this song whenever I read our Scripture Lesson for today. And, THAT'S because BOTH the song AND the Scripture Lesson describe a SIMILAR experience. In BOTH cases, someone is EXPOSED for WHO they really ARE, INCLUDING their SIN and their INADEQUACY, their ILLUSIONS and their PAIN. And, it HURTS, doesn't it, when someone seems ABLE to SEE right through us, and seems to KNOW our DEEPEST selves? And it's PAINFUL, because we ALL work so hard to COVER-UP so MUCH of what's UNDERNEATH. And, I like the song because it CAPTURES some of that PAIN of being exposed.

Well, in our Scripture Lesson today, the woman doesn't want to TELL Jesus about her personal life. WHY? Because it HURTS too much! And it makes her feel so INADEQUATE. Now, in order to understand WHY that's true, you NEED to know that, in JESUS' day, women were considered the PROPERTY of a MAN. They went from their FATHER'S house to their HUSBAND'S house. And while a WOMAN could NOT divorce her husband for ANY reason, a MAN could divorce his WIFE for literally ANYTHING that displeased him. You see: MOSES had said in the LAW, in the TORAH, that IF a man found something OBJECTIONABLE in his wife, ALL he had to DO was write out a certificate of divorce and HAND it to her in the presence of 2 witnesses. THEN, he could literally THROW her out into the street with NOTHING! And by JESUS' day, the rabbis were ARGUING over WHAT Moses MEANT by *something OBJECTIONABLE*. And Rabbi Shammai, and HIS school of rabbis, said that Moses meant that a man could DIVORCE his wife ONLY if she had committed ADULTERY. However, Rabbi Hillel, and HIS school of rabbis, said that Moses meant that a man could divorce his wife for ANYTHING that DISPLEASED him, even burning the STEW. So, GUESS which one caught ON with the MAN in the street? And by the time of Jesus, the DIVORCE rate in Israel was MUCH higher than it is in the U.S. TODAY. Well, in order to SURVIVE in such a male-dominated society, a woman who been DIVORCED by her husband either had to move back in with her father, or move in with her brother, or very QUICKLY hook-up with another MAN and get MARRIED again. And of course, the woman in our STORY today had already had 5 husbands, and she was now LIVING with some GUY who was NOT her husband. And THAT'S why she doesn't want to TELL Jesus. She's EMBARRASSED! She feels like she CAN'T even keep a HUSBAND. IMAGINE how INADEQUATE this woman must have FELT, EVEN if she was just a lousy COOK. So, of COURSE she wouldn't want to TELL her story to a total STRANGER.

However, SHE didn't need to TELL Jesus because HE told HER! And the experience described in the SONG can help us understand SOME of her PAIN as He was TALKING. He was "KILLING me SOFTLY!" Of COURSE, He WAS killing her softly, because ALL of a sudden, her ILLUSIONS, her DEFENSES, and her FACADE were ALL being stripped away. And she FOUND herself standing there NAKED, so to speak, in the presence of a total STRANGER! And WHAT an EMBARRASSING and PAINFUL moment that MUST have BEEN for her! Have YOU ever HAD such a moment? Well, I have... and it HURTS, terribly!

When I was younger, I read several NOVELS by the great author, Robert Penn Warren. And in EACH one of them, Warren SYMBOLIZES so WELL this horrendous pain of being EXPOSED. Although the DETAILS are always different, there COMES a time in EACH novel when the MAIN character is CONFRONTED with, and must DEAL with, WHO he really IS, and WHO he has BEEN, up 'til NOW. And in EVERY case, that character ends up VIOLENTLY ill, PHYSICALLY sick! And, THAT'S the way Robert Penn Warren SYMBOLIZES this painful experience of being EXPOSED!

Now, we DON'T really see the PAIN of this woman at the well. But we DO notice that she IMMEDIATELY changes the subject! She immediately attempts to RE-DIRECT the conversation to

something SAFER -- to more SPIRITUAL matters. *I can SEE that you are a PROPHET*, she says. And WHAT a HUMAN response THAT is! I mean, isn't that what WE often do? WHEN someone brings up an ISSUE that hits "TOO CLOSE to home" -- like ALCOHOL for an ALCOHOLIC, or DEATH for a GRIEVING person; or DIETS for a FAT person; or SEX for an IMPOTENT guy, or AGING for someone experiencing a mid-life CRISIS -- isn't it our FIRST inclination to quickly CHANGE the subject? And THAT'S what the WOMAN at the well is DOING here. And, it's BECAUSE it's just TOO painful! We DON'T want to have to FACE it and DEAL with it, so we CHANGE the subject.

Thankfully, however, the story does NOT end here. Jesus does NOT just CONFRONT this woman, and LEAVE her standing there feeling "naked" and hopeless. Jesus DOESN'T just "strum her PAIN with His fingers, and sing her LIFE with His words, and KILL her softly!" No, the ONE who EXAMINES us, and knows us through and through, was NOT sent into this world to JUDGE and CONDEMN, but to SAVE! Jesus CAME, NOT to crush us with the WEIGHT of our past and present SINS, our failures and inadequacies. Instead, Jesus came into our lives that we might understand the TRUTH, the truth that even though we are known for WHO and WHAT we ARE, we are still LOVED and valued JUST as we are. AS the QUOTE at the top of the bulletin says: *to believe in God means to know that there is SOMEBODY who KNOWS us, through and through, and still LOVES us.*

Now, in the CASE of the woman at the well, Jesus SHOWS her this TRUTH, this great LOVE, in a very unique and special way: He REVEALS to her His TRUE identity as the Messiah. In other words, He trusts HER with the DEEPEST, most intimate TRUTH about who HE is! Now, I don't know if YOU have ever experienced having someone SHARE with you their DEEPEST, most intimate SELF and secrets, OR, if YOU have ever trusted another person with YOURS. But IF you ever have, you KNOW how much TRUST such DEEP sharing REQUIRES. It's NOT easy! And you ALSO know what a GIFT it is, and how AFFIRMING it is, to be TRUSTED with INTIMATE knowledge about another person. I know that I feel very BLESSED, because I happen to be in a position where people OFTEN trust me that way. However, because I ALSO know how RARE it is when I trust another person that way, I STILL -- after nearly 32 years of ministry -- feel very AFFIRMED when someone chooses to TRUST me! It is SUCH a precious gift, and I CHERISH it! And when I am GIVEN such a gift, it makes me feel good about MYSELF!

Well, THAT must have been the WAY that this woman at the well felt that day! HER self-esteem must have SKYROCKETED, because ONCE she realizes that Jesus ACCEPTS her just AS she IS, and that Jesus is willing to INVEST in her, and share who HE is with HER, THEN she seems ABLE to accept HERSELF and her past. And we KNOW this because, all of a sudden, she's out there EVANGELIZING! ALL of a sudden, she's OUT there telling EVERYBODY in her village about Jesus! And I bet that THESE were the SAME people who had JUDGED her, OSTRASIZED her, and made her feel so ASHAMED of herself. And NOTICE that she DOESN'T just say: *Hey gang, COME and listen to this WONDERFUL preacher, who SPEAKS SO eloquently about spiritual matters!* No! SHE gets PERSONAL! She says: *COME and see this guy who told me EVERYTHING I've ever DONE!* And we KNOW that that's a LOT, don't we? You see: what a CHANGE in this woman! No, Jesus DOESN'T just leave her EXPOSED, embarrassed, and hurting -- with a SHATTERED ego! Jesus AFFIRMS her, ACCEPTS her, and LETS her KNOW that she is LOVED and VALUED just as she is.

Therefore, IN this encounter with Jesus, this Samaritan woman PERSONALLY experiences the FORGIVENESS and RENEWAL that stands as the MOST important moment in our WORSHIP service EACH Sunday, because INTO her condition of SIN and separation, SHE was addressed by a WORD of healing and a WORD of hope. And, AS I always SAY: *It's a WORD that we meet, FACE-to-FACE, in Jesus Christ. And, THAT Word PROCLAIMS that WE are LOVED with God's EVERLASTING love, that WE are of INFINITE value and worth JUST as we are. Standing in THAT Word, and THAT Word alone, I would DARE to declare to YOU that YOU are FORGIVEN, that YOU have been RECEIVED and made WHOLE. THIS is GOD'S doing! So let us REJOICE, and be GLAD in it!* You know, I SAY this statement ALMOST word-for-word, week after week, BECAUSE I want us ALL to MEMORIZE it, and

NEVER forget it. WHY? Because THIS is the GOOD NEWS of Jesus Christ in a NUTSHELL! He DOESN'T just take us APART! He DOESN'T just EXPOSE our SIN and failure! He DOESN'T just hold up a MIRROR in front of us, and force us to LOOK at WHO we ARE and WHO we have BEEN and WHO we're BECOMING! No! Jesus also TOUCHES us with an AMAZING kind of GRACE and LOVE, a GRACE and love that BUILDS us UP and GIVES us strength and confidence, COURAGE and peace of mind! You see, friends: the STORY of the woman at the well is OUR story as well. WE, too, are KNOWN through and through! NOTHING is hidden from our Lord! We ALL stand before our Lord totally NAKED and EXPOSED! BUT, the GOOD news is that He LOVES us anyway! And He came NOT to judge us, but to SAVE us! He came NOT to CONDEMN us, but to offer us LIFE in ALL its fullness! And He came NOT to give us what we DESERVE, but to give us something that we can never EARN. And it's something SO powerful that it can literally CHANGE our IDENTITY and CHANGE our lives, JUST as it did for this woman at the well! And like HER, we JUST won't be able to CONTAIN it. It will BURST forth and OVERFLOW from us, touching and enhancing the lives of ALL those around us, just as it DID for HER! And it's something so PRECIOUS that we will cherish the memory of EVERY moment in time that we have EVER felt it. AND, it's something so LIFE-GIVING that it will FEEL to us like LIVING water, like an INNER spring of living water, GUSHING up from WITHIN us, and CONTINUALLY offering us NEW life over and over again. And SO, what IS it? What IS this SOMETHING that we can never EARN, but is SO precious? What is this SOMETHING that COMES to us FREELY from the loving heart of CHRIST, our SAVIOR? What IS this SOMETHING that Jesus offered this WOMAN at the well, which was STRONG enough to CHANGE her entire IDENTITY? Well, WE in the CHURCH call it "GRACE..." And it's the most AMAZING thing in the world! And WHEN we FEEL it, it CHANGES our lives! And the GOOD news IS that it's OFFERED to every ONE of us! Friends, let's ALLOW ourselves to RECEIVE it and FEEL it! Let's EMBRACE this divine GRACE that's so FREELY given! And let's NEVER take it for granted, but CHERISH it, and give THANKS for it, ALWAYS. For it IS life-CHANGING and life-GIVING like NOTHING else! And it is TRULY amazing! Let's sing together *AMAZING GRACE*. AMEN.

**HYMN: *Amazing Grace! How Sweet the Sound***