

THE MESSAGE for March 27, 2011**John 4:5-42*****Lead Us... Loving The Unlovable*****The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller**

We begin with the story of Ted Stallard. Check out his story on the screen...

(Video by Mary Robison Reynolds at <http://www.makeadifferencemovie.com/>)

As she stood in front of her fifth grader class on the first day of school, she told the children an untruth. Like most teachers she looked at her students and said, she loved them all the same. However that was impossible because there in the front row, slumped in his seat was a little boy named Teddy Stallard.

Miss Thompson had watched Teddy the year before and noticed that he didn't play well with the other children, that his clothes were messy, and that he constantly needed a bath. And Teddy could be unpleasant.

It got to the point where Miss Thompson would actually take delight in making his papers with a broad red pen, making bold X's and then putting a big "F" at the top of his papers. At the school where Miss Thompson taught, she was required to review each child's past records, and she put Teddy's off till the last. However, when she reviewed his file, she was in for a surprise.

Teddy's first grade teacher wrote: "Teddy is a bright child with a ready laugh. He does his work neatly and has good manners. He is such a joy to be around."

His second grade teacher wrote: "Teddy is an excellent student, well liked by his classmates, but he is troubled because his mother has a terminal illness, and life at home must be a struggle."

His third grade teacher wrote: "His mother's death has been hard on him. He tries to do his best, but his father doesn't show much interest, and his home life will soon affect him if some steps aren't taken."

Teddy's fourth grade teacher wrote: "Teddy is withdrawn and doesn't show much interest in school. He doesn't have many friends and he sometimes sleep in class."

By now Miss Thompson realized the problem and she was ashamed of herself. She felt even worse when her students brought her Christmas presents, wrapped in beautiful ribbons and bright paper, except for Teddy's. His present was clumsily wrapped in the heavy brown paper that he got from a grocery bag. Miss Thompson took pains to open it in the middle of the other presents.

Some of the students started to laugh when she found a rhinestone bracelet with some of the stones missing and a bottle that was one-quarter full of perfume. But she

stifled the children's laughter when she exclaimed how pretty the bracelet was, putting it on, and dabbing some of the perfume on her wrist.

Teddy Stallard stayed after school that day just long enough to say, "Miss Thompson, today you smell just like my mom used to." After the children left she cried for at least an hour. On that very day, she quit teaching reading, writing and arithmetic. Instead she began to teach children.

Miss Thompson paid particular attention to Teddy. As she worked with him, his mind began to come alive. The more she encouraged him, the faster he responded. By the end of the year, Teddy had become one of the smartest children in the class, and despite the lie that she would love the children all the same, Teddy became one of her "teacher's pets."

A year later, she found a note under her door from Teddy, telling her that she was the best teacher he'd ever had in his whole life! Six years went by before she got another note from Teddy. He then wrote that he had finished high school third in his class, and she was still the best teacher he ever had in his whole life. Four years after that, she got another letter, saying that while things had been tough at times, he'd stayed in school. He'd stuck with it, and would soon graduate from college with the highest of honors. Again he assured Miss Thompson that she was still the best and favorite teacher he'd ever had. Then four more years passed, and yet another letter came. After he got his bachelor's degree he had decided to go a little further. She was still the best and favorite teacher he'd ever had. But now his name was a little longer... the letter was signed "Theodore F. Stallard, M.D." The story does not end here.

There was yet another letter that spring. Teddy said he'd met this girl and was going to be married. He explained that his father had died a couple of years ago, and he was wondering if Miss Thompson might agree to sit at the wedding in the place that was reserved for the mother of the groom. Of course Miss Thompson did. And guess what? She wore that bracelet, the one with several rhinestones missing. Moreover, she made sure that she was wearing the perfume that Teddy remembered his mother was wearing on their last Christmas together.

They hugged each other, and Dr. Stallard whispered in Miss Thompson's ear: "Thank you for believing in me. Thank you so much for making me feel important and showing me that I could make a difference. Miss Thompson with tears in her eyes whispered back. She said, "Teddy you have it all wrong. You were the one who taught me that I could make a difference. I didn't know how to teach until I met you!"

You can never tell what type of impact you may have on another's life by your actions... or lack of action. Please consider this fact in your venture through life, and just try to make a difference in someone else's life today.

(This video was created from a fictional story written by Elizabeth Silance Ballard published in 1974 by Home Life Magazine as "Three Letters From Teddy.")

Every day we come in contact with people like Teddy. People who are hurting. People who feel unloved. It may be a next door neighbor, a family member, a spouse, a friend, a coworker, the person sitting beside you right now. It's that private pain that can eat away at our souls, a pain caused by sin and sin affects all of us. Sin prevents us from living life to the fullest.

Thankfully – Jesus has overcome the power of sin in our lives. And life can be restored for one and all.

Each one of us here today has everything we need to bring healing into the lives of those who are hurting. It starts with a relationship with Jesus. He shows us how to love the unlovable in our reading from John's Gospel chapter 4 verses 5-42...

(Read the Text)

Jesus and this woman came from two different worlds. They came from two different groups of people, Jews and Samaritans. They found each other unlovable. Jesus, a Jewish man, comes from the upper religious hierarchy. He belongs to chosen people of God. Jesus even points out this difference to the woman in verse 22, "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews."

The differences between Jesus and this woman opened the door for a lively encounter. The Samaritan woman holds her own with Jesus. She pretty much says "no" when he asks her for a drink of water. She knows the boundaries. She doesn't flinch when Jesus reveals that he knows her past. Everybody knew about her past.

She is perhaps hiding behind the pain which may give her the *huspa* to engage Jesus this way. Something she was not supposed to be doing. And he was not supposed to be engaging her in this way.

What happens next borders on miraculous. The disciples, in verse 27, are astonished that Jesus is talking to this woman. The Gospel writer dropped the Samaritan label that was used to start the conversation. The writer also dropped the label of Jew when the woman goes and says, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!"

Something has changed. Everything has changed. Jesus has invested in her, and she has invested in him. Two people, from two different worlds, who should have found each other unlovable, begin to find each other lovable.

In fact, she finds Jesus to be so lovable that she changes her perspective about him and is so excited she runs and tells others about Jesus leaving her water jar at the well. Her water jar was her lifeline but she doesn't need it anymore she has Jesus as her lifeline. Before meeting Jesus she avoided people, now she can't wait to tell people

about him regardless of her past, regardless of what people might think of her. That's because it's not about her it's about Jesus.

She has been so transformed by her encounter with Jesus that that relationship flows over into other people's lives too. Her story changes their lives too. Her relationship with Jesus opens the door for others to experience the Kingdom of God too.

Part of our human nature is to use labels when we speak about others who are different. We use labels in the racial arena, religious arena, socio-economic arena, political arena, gender and sexuality arena. We use labels because sin has created a boundary of unlovable-ness.

Talk with any 3rd or 4th grader, and they'll tell you about all the different groups in school - who is loveable and who is unlovable. But as baptized children of God we are transformed by Jesus. His love flows into our lives and reaches across all kinds of barriers and boundaries that we have created. Jesus shows us how to love the unlovable.

I've come to realize that losers use labels. Labels are for losers. Say that with me. *Labels are for losers.*

I look around this room and I don't see any losers. I see winners. I see forgiven sinners. I see people longing to live a meaningful life. And if that's the case then we are no different than the woman at the well or the Teddys in the world who are longing to live a meaningful life too.

That life begins with Jesus. It's a relationship that is nurtured and supported in this faith community, where Jesus promises to be – where two or three are gathered in his name... May he, Jesus our Lord and Savior, lead us this day and every day to love the unlovable wherever we go. Amen.