

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(March 16, 2014)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: SNAPSHOTS OF A SAVIOR

A Wonderful Counselor

(John 3, 4)

Study #1

Introduction: A course in counseling...

I graduated from seminary in 1982 and have never ceased being grateful for the training I received while at Dallas Theological Seminary.

DTS wasn't perfect by a long shot. But the four years I spent there were very important years of preparing me to teach and to preach the Word. The courses in Greek and Hebrew, theology, church history, and in Bible exposition laid a solid foundation for much of what I have done here at Northwest.

The seminary training did not, however, equip me in all forms of pastoral ministry, notably, counseling.

I did take the required course in counseling (yes, for my major I was required to take ONE course), but that hardly sufficed to prepare me for the kinds of conversations I would regularly have with people I love in the church.

Once things at the church got rolling I quickly found myself confronted with situations that required a counseling response, and, as the title of Jay Adams' well-known book, Competent to Counsel, says it, I wasn't.

So, early on I read lots of books, listened to lots of tapes, and went to more than a few seminars to fill in the huge counseling gaps in my pastoral toolbox.

While my competency may still be suspect, I can honestly say that one of the great privileges of serving as a pastor has been the opportunity it has offered me to enter into the life stories of people who are facing challenging times, and to offer counsel.

Counseling plays a major role in our culture. Over the past half century there has been an ever-expanding role of the professional counselor in everyday life.

In fact, when we think of "counseling" we may instinctively think of conversations that take place in formal settings, like the office of a trained professional or a pastor's study.

But these are not the only (or often, the optimal) settings for counseling to take place.

Serious counseling is often done in a home, when a parent carefully listens to a child's struggles and offers feedback or explicit direction.

Loving husbands and wives can and should offer counsel and receive counsel over the course of their lives together.

Counsel happens in Care Groups where friends speak [*Ephesians 4:15*] *the truth in love* to each other.

Friends offer counsel to each other in living rooms, at Starbucks, at Taco Cabana, and anywhere else they can find space for meaningful talk. And we want it that way. As King Solomon tells us:

***[Proverbs 27:9] Oil and perfume make the heart glad,
So a man's counsel is sweet to his friend.***

The counsel of someone who takes time to listen is worth its weight in gold. We value carefully thought through, loving counsel.

Have you ever sat in the presence of someone who seemed able to look right into you, someone that you sensed was FOR YOU, and who then had words for you?

There are few things more life-giving than to listen to someone who knows you, someone who is wise, and someone who wants nothing but God's best for you.

A skilled, loving counselor is a treasure.

A Counselor to come

Early on in his book, the prophet Isaiah wrote about the coming Messiah with words that are more in line with the celebration of Christmas than Good Friday and Easter.

[Isaiah 9:6] For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

This morning I want to focus on the first title in Isaiah 9:6. The Messiah will be a ***“wonderful counselor.”***

We know what a counselor does today. She gives guidance and advice. He comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. She has great insight. He listens carefully.

Well, it turns out that the idea of a counselor you might pay to see today is nearly identical to the biblical idea of a counselor.¹

When Jethro (Exodus 18) saw the tremendous burden his son-in-law, Moses, faced in deciding disputes among the Jews, he approached Moses and said, ***“I will give you counsel...”*** (ya’atz) and proceeded to line out a plan that would keep Moses from burning out.

Young King Rehoboam rejected the counsel of the old men (1 Kings 12) to his detriment.²

Psalm 33 says that nations and peoples sometimes devise counsel against God. But the Lord nullifies that wicked counsel.

The first psalm says that the wise man does not walk in the counsel of the wicked and Solomon's proverbs tell us that wise men and women heed godly counsel (1:25, 30; 12:15)

As Isaiah looked forward to the future welfare of the nation of Israel he saw that her only hope lay in this One who would be, among other things, a wonderful counselor.

The Child who is to come, and on whose shoulders the government of the world will rest, is one whose counsel is exactly what all people need. This Child will be the Messiah (the anointed one) and the Messiah is revealed in the New Testament to be Jesus. Jesus is, among other things, a wonderful counselor.

This morning we'll look together at two vignettes from the Gospels that show Jesus doing things that counselors do. We will see His willingness to engage, His capacity for listening, His ability to discern motives, and His skill in giving direction, all of which make Him a wonderful counselor.

Jesus Counsels Nicodemus (John 3:1-16)

A Nighttime Visit from Nicodemus (vv. 1-2)

Meet Nicodemus (v. 1)

[1] Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews...

Nicodemus, the counselee in this story, was a Pharisee. While toward the latter part of His life the Pharisees were His fiercest enemies, even at the beginning, Jesus never got a lot of warm support from them.

That is a bit surprising because we might have thought that they and Jesus would have meshed well.

¹ The Hebrew word (ya’atz) is a common word in the Old Testament. As a verb, it means “to give counsel, to deliberate, to purpose, to determine.”

² Rabshekah (an Assyrian general) boasted to King Hezekiah, ***“I have counsel and strength for war”*** (2 Kings 18:20)

They were all about calling Israel back to obedience to the Mosaic Law, something that sounds like something Jesus would applaud.

The Pharisees were the most orthodox Jewish party in Jesus' day and were quite popular among the common people during the time of Jesus.

Sadly, though, by and large they cared more about the letter than the spirit of the Law, were more concerned for what people thought about them than what God thought, and were more interested in outward obedience than internal transformation.

For those reasons and others, the Pharisees opposed Jesus. But not *all* of the Pharisees.

Nicodemus was one who was genuinely interested in finding out more about Jesus. He would have just witnessed (or at least been aware of) Jesus' having just cleansed the Jerusalem temple of its abuses - and would have likely approved of it.³

So, Nicodemus was a Pharisee, but Nicodemus was more than that. John also tells us that he was **“a ruler of the Jews”**, meaning that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the chief judicial body of the Jews.

Well, one time this powerful and God-fearing man, Nicodemus, came to talk with Jesus. He arrived alone. At night.

Nicodemus greeted Jesus (v. 2)

[2a] this man came to Him by night...

We wonder, why night?

Often, people do things at night they wouldn't do in broad daylight.

Did Nicodemus not want to be seen with Jesus? Was he afraid that others would think poorly of him for going to see Jesus? Was he hoping to get an answer to a question that he didn't want to ask in the light of day?

Did he go all alone because he wanted to get to know Jesus without the distractions of a crowd? Or could it be that there was something about Jesus that Nicodemus found compelling?

We don't know why the visit took place at night, one-on-one, but Nicodemus' first words to the younger Jesus were flattering.

Nicodemus' greeting (v. 2b)

[2b]...and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

That's a nice way to begin a conversation. Start off with a compliment.

As soon as Nicodemus had paid his compliments to Jesus, Jesus spoke back to Nicodemus. Interestingly enough, Jesus didn't reply with a compliment back.

Jesus INSIGHTFUL Counsel to Nicodemus (vv. 3-5)

Addresses issues of the heart (v. 3)

[3] Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly⁴, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.”

The content of Jesus' words

Now, the content of Jesus' words is certainly remarkable.

To Nicodemus, the words **“born again”** would have described what happens when a Gentile became a Jew. All Jews knew that Gentiles needed to be **“born again”** (i.e. become Jewish) if they were going to come to God.

³ After all, it was not Pharisees, but Sadducees who held political power and who were responsible for running the Temple and its services. Several scholars suggest that the Pharisees were probably smiling in satisfaction when Jesus overturned the money changers' tables and drove out the riffraff with whips, because they, too, were aware of the abuses, too, and were offended by them.

⁴ **“Truly, truly...”** is a formula that carries the sense, “Sit up and take notice.”

But here, Jesus, addressing a Jewish ruler (a Pharisee and Sanhedrin member!), speaks of a need for re-birth.⁵

The clear message is that stuff like nationality, race, birth order, gender, and social status carry no weight with God. For anyone to come to God they must be ***“born again.”***

But if the content is stunning, the context of the comment is just as striking.

The context of Jesus’ words

Jesus has just received a really polite compliment from Nicodemus. Social norms - of that day and our own - require a *quid pro quo*, reciprocity, payback.

Nicodemus was probably expecting Jesus to reply with something like, *“Thanks, Nicodemus. And I hear wonderful things about the role you play on the Sanhedrin.”*

Evidently, that’s not how a wonderful counselor rolls.

Jesus welcomed an older man (members of the Sanhedrin were typically at least forty years of age) who came to see Him alone at night.

He put two and two together and came up with the “four” that said, *“This guy has not come to trade trivialities. He has ‘first things’ on his mind.”*

So, knowing the urgency of the visit, Jesus didn’t waste time with small talk or normal social graces like compliments and flattery. He cut straight to the chase and spoke about eternity.

Follow Jesus through the Gospels and you’ll find Him doing this a lot. He answers a pedestrian question with an earth-shaking truth about life. He turns someone’s observation about a tragedy into a lesson about God’s ways.

⁵ This would have been like us, today, telling a tenured seminary professor to go to Vacation Bible School to learn theology.

Jesus went deep, below the surface, to the heart - and He went there quick. It was never out of place for Him to introduce God, eternity, or right vs. wrong into a conversation.

Due to His awareness of eternal realities and His insight into what was really on people’s minds and hearts, he refused to waste everyone’s most precious commodity: TIME.

Jesus and Nicodemus continued talking, with Nicodemus proving to be somewhat more dense than deep.

When he asked, [4] ***“How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?”*** - we want to say, *“Really, Nicodemus?”*

Still, Jesus patiently explained that birth by water (nature’s birth) AND birth by the Spirit were necessary to enter God’s Kingdom.

As the discussion continued, Jesus spoke to Nicodemus as no one had likely spoken to this powerful man in a long, long time.

Jesus’ BOLD Counsel (vv. 7-12)

The high-ranking Pharisee, Nicodemus, was confused and amazed.

So Jesus spoke to his amazement, [7] ***“Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”***

Hear Nicodemus’ confusion again: [9] ***“How can these things be?”***

Now listen to Jesus’ astonishment.

[10] ***“Are you the teacher of Israel⁶ and do not understand these things? [11] Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony.***

⁶ This may indicate that Nicodemus was actually the pre-eminent teacher among the Pharisees.

[12] If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

I'll bet it had been a long time since anyone had questioned Nicodemus' ability to understand spiritual stuff. But Jesus was not the kind of counselor who was afraid of someone in a high position.

During this nighttime counseling session, Nicodemus couldn't handle the truth. But Jesus was of a mind that he should have been able to handle the truth - and said so. He challenged Nicodemus!

This is Jesus at His most audacious. An older gentleman approaches with a compliment. Jesus responds with an eternal truth, which the elderly Nicodemus doesn't get and Jesus chides him for not getting it.

A wonderful counselor challenges. He raises the bar high. He expects a lot from the counselee.

If we didn't know Jesus better we'd think He was being rude. But Jesus wasn't being rude. His words were sourced in compassion and with a vision for Nicodemus' salvation.

Now listen to Jesus' next words.

Jesus' FINAL Counsel (vv. 13-16)

He looked straight at Nicodemus and said, ***"You must be born again"*** That's a statement. It is not a challenge and it's not an invitation.

Jesus wasn't urging Nicodemus to *"Go get yourself reborn."*

"You must be born again" is a diagnosis without a prescription. To hear Jesus say those words about being ***"born of water and the Spirit"*** actually brings about a sense of utter despair.

And, the reason that this statement is not *encouraging*, but is rather *discouraging* is because of the analogy with the physical birth process.

We all know that a baby being born is not in charge of the process - either of the conception, of its development within the womb, or of its final entrance into the world.

We may say, *"The baby comes out when she is ready,"* but we do not really mean that the baby decides when to be born. Forces are at work outside of the baby's control.

As Nicodemus listens to Jesus, he becomes aware of his desperate plight. Being a Jew, a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, would do him no good. There was a barrier that "station in life" couldn't climb. He can't "reborn" himself.

So, to confusion has been added hopelessness. And that is just where this wonderful counselor wants Nicodemus to be - hopeless.

Jesus knows that only when someone reaches the end of his own rope will he be willing to "do" the only thing necessary to be "born again."

Into that deep sense of hopelessness and desperation, Jesus spoke truth and love to Nicodemus on that night.

[13] "No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. [14] As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; [15] so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. [16] For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

The wonderful counselor brings a man from the world of religious authority to see that he is a spiritual toddler, which opens his eyes to his desperate need, which makes the offer of salvation by faith alone in Jesus alone a beautiful lifeline.

The wonderful counselor has refused small talk, encouraged confusion, led His counselee into despair, and then opened the door to eternal life.

That's Biblical Counseling 101, direct from Jesus. That's Isaiah 9:6 in living color. And the application of Isaiah 9:6 continues in another encounter that occurred right on the heels of this one.

John records Jesus' and His disciples' travel from Judea to Galilee as we switch from chapter 3 to 4. We quickly find Him engaged in another one-on-one conversation.

This time, though, He is not in Israel, but in the non-Jewish area of Samaria. (And we'll leave a discussion of WHY He "needed" to pass through Samaria for another day.⁷)

This time it is not night, but the middle of the day. This time, the person with whom he speaks is not seeking Him out; rather, He initiates contact. And this time, the counselee is not a male influential religious heavyweight; this time, the counselee is a woman with a reputation.

Here's the setting:

Jesus was sitting by Jacob's well⁸ around noon just outside the Samaritan city of Sychar on a sweltering hot summer day. He was alone, the disciples having gone the short distance from the well into town to buy supplies.

John tells us that He was tired from the journey to Sychar and was resting beside the well when a woman approached the well.

Jesus Counsels a Samaritan Woman (John 4:1-26)

A Midday Encounter at a Well (vv. 7-14)

Jesus asked for help (vv. 7-9)

[7a] There came a woman of Samaria to draw water.

With Jesus exhausted, this woman's appearance was a gift. She could draw water for herself AND for Jesus.

That seems to be what Jesus was thinking, anyway. He spoke to her, ***[7b] "Give me a drink."***

⁷ The most direct route between Judea and Galilee was to travel through Samaria as Samaria was the region located between Galilee and Judea. And, certainly, it only made sense that Jesus would travel to Galilee by way of Samaria. It was the shortest route between the two points. And, as the passage makes clear, Jesus did pass through Samaria. But, not every Jew would have made the choice Jesus did. In fact, in travelling from Galilee to Judea, many Jews would go many miles out of their way to keep from setting foot in the "unclean" region of Samaria.

⁸ The well is active to this day, which speaks of a very active underground aquifer to have been in use since 1800 BC!

It was a simple request, but there was more going on than meets the ear here. Jesus' request is significant and there is a method to the overtures of the wonderful counselor to this woman. The whole scene is fraught with unusuals.

- It was unusual that He, a solitary man, would have spoken to a solitary woman in a public setting. In ancient times in the Near East, that simply wasn't done. It was not considered proper.⁹
- It was unusual in that He, a Jew, would have spoken to a Samaritan, for ***[9] Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.***
- It was unusual that she came to the well at noon. The normal times to fetch water were the cooler parts of the day - early morning and late evening. She arrived at the well at the hottest point of the day.¹⁰

Jesus could have conformed to convention and not spoken to the woman. He could have found a bucket and drawn His own water. He could have waited for the twelve to get back with supplies for a drink.

But just as He had done with Nicodemus, he put two and two together and came up with the "four" that this woman needed what only He could provide. He knew that she was thirsty for more than well water.

So, throwing convention to the wind, He engaged her in conversation. When she asked Him how it was that He, a Jew (!), asked her, a Samaritan woman (!) for a drink, He had a ready and intriguing answer.

Jesus offers living water to the skeptical woman (vv. 10-14)

The promise (v. 10)

[10] Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

⁹ According to one of the rabbis of Jesus' day, "A man shall not be alone with a woman in an inn, not even with his sister or his daughter, on account of what men may think. A man shall not talk with a woman in the street, not even with his own wife, and especially not with another woman, on account of what men may say."

¹⁰ The rest of the passage makes it pretty clear that this woman was avoiding the company of the other women of the village.

The wonderful counselor says surprising things. Unexpected things. He turns the tables.

Jesus had first asked her for a drink; now He suggests that He could give her a drink.

He doesn't offer to draw it for her. He doesn't offer to sell it to her. It is hers for the asking if she will receive it.

The point of His offer is to focus her attention on Him, and it does. But she's got her doubts. All her life she's heard "lines" from men and she's not impressed with this one.

The doubts (vv. 11-12)

[11] She said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep;¹¹ where then do You get that living water?" [12] "You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself and his sons and his cattle."

Her concerns are, first, with the practical and mundane. "*Mister, you don't even have a bucket.*" (And she can't believe that this Stranger would give her better water than her ancestor, Jacob, had.)

But the promise of "living" water (a term with a double meaning, referring to flowing water and/or to a means of quenching spiritual thirst) has piqued her curiosity and raised just a glimmer of hope.

Jesus skillfully takes her question and runs with it.

The invitation (vv. 13-14)

[13] "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; [14] but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life."¹²

¹¹ This was a very deep well by old world standards (we know that it was about 120 feet deep).

¹² Jesus is not saying that the person who tastes of His water shall never be thirsty again, and that one drink will satisfy forever. It is better than that. His point is that

Notice how Jesus draws her in. Notice how he works off of the assumption that she is thirsty. (He assumes that you are thirsty, too, for what only He can supply.)

Well, sadly, the woman totally missed the point and zeroed in only on the possibility that Jesus was going to magically make H₂O appear so that she wouldn't have to make the long, lonely trek to the well every day (v. 15).

So, Jesus got personal.

Jesus' Counsel Turns PERSONAL (vv. 16-18)

[16] He said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here."

No doubt she wasn't expecting that one.

Her response was a short, terse, "***I have no husband***", which, while technically correct, was also less than honest. What she said was true, but it wasn't "*the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.*"

So Jesus clarified, pointing out that she had been married five times and was currently living with a man to whom she was not married. (v. 17)

Now, why would this wonderful counselor bring up such uncomfortable stuff?

You may have heard that one of the core duties of a counselor is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. I believe that is true and I also believe that this is what Jesus is doing here.

He intends to soon reveal Himself to this woman. He is going to let her know that He is the Messiah who will give eternal life to all who come to Him in faith.

If she is going to appreciate the weight of that revelation, she has got to be thirsty for more than water.

the person who drinks of His living water has an eternally renewable resource to meet that ever present thirst for God in the human heart.

She needs to feel the weight of her sin, to see herself for who she is. She has to sense her desperate plight before God.

So, Jesus holds up a mirror for her to get a good long look at herself, creating a thirst for forgiveness.

The woman didn't like what she saw. And, she responded as so many of us respond when we aren't comfortable with the direction of a conversation. We deflect. We change the subject. Counselors have to expect deflection and Jesus got a face full of it right here.

Jesus' Counsel Turns INSTRUCTIVE (vv. 19-24)

Deflection (vv. 19-20)

[19] The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. [20] "Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."

Did you catch that?

Jesus: *"Woman, you have made a wreck of your life! You are violating God's Laws even as we speak."*

Her response, *"Well, sir, isn't it interesting that different people have different places to worship God? What do you think?"*

Nicely played. But Jesus wasn't derailed from keeping things on track. He didn't force the issue when it came to her sin, but He kept the conversation on God and His ways.

Re-direction (vv. 21-24)

[21] Jesus said to her, "Women, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. [22] "You worship that which you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. [23] "But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. [24] "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

With those words Jesus radically challenged the Samaritan woman's concept of God. He portrays God as seeking her. She has been disobedient, sinful, and immoral. She has been running away from Him all her life. God is still pursuing her.

And the words of this wonderful counselor are having their effect on this woman. As He has gotten personal and has shot straight with her about the ways of God, she is turning receptive. She's finally thirsty.

Her final words are spoken in the form of a statement, but barely visible below the surface there is a desperate hope and longing.

Jesus' Final Counsel to the Samaritan Woman (vv. 25-26)

[25] The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us."

She didn't dare say it out loud. Her statement just hints at the possibility. *"He's going to be like... It's not possible that... You're not... Are You...?"*

Jesus' answer quenched her thirst.

[26] Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He."

Jesus skillfully counseled this woman to the point of salvation. At every step along the way, He has been leading her, guiding her, pursuing her.

He decided to go where she was. He chose to initiate a conversation with her. He pressed the discussion to the point of personal application to her private life. He drove her to a realization of her need.

Then and only then did He reveal Himself to be the One who could uniquely meet her need. He alone could quench that spiritual thirst that had driven her to try and find life and love in all the wrong places.

Conclusion:

If you and I were to examine Jesus' interactions as recorded in the Gospels we would see Him doing the work that counselors the world over do on a daily basis.

He addressed the issues of anger and depression and anxiety and fear and selfishness - and more

He spoke with all kinds of people, from rich young rulers to penitent thieves to distraught mothers to impatient fathers to wayward disciples to hungry crowds to Roman governors - and more.

And in each and every case, Jesus spoke truth in love.

To know Jesus is to know that your Savior is a Wonderful Counselor who knows you inside and out, who is for you, and who will lead you to His abundant life.