

Sermon Lent 3A - March 15, 2020

All Saints, Mt. Pleasant

Rev. Ginger Litman-Koon

John 4:5-42

+ [Jesus] came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "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." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him. Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." +

This week, a new term has surged to the fore in the national conversation: Social distancing. Some of you may be practicing social distancing right now, by scooting juuust a little farther down the pew than you usually do, and some of you may be listening to this sermon at home through our website, because you're heeding your healthcare provider's recommendation to embrace social distancing to guard against Coronavirus.

Social distancing is a measure being implemented in some communities through encouraging people to keep at least 3 feet between themselves and others as well as to cancel certain public gatherings or events. The introverts among us might be tempted to boast: "This is news? I've been practicing social distancing for years." Well, since we are here today, fortunately this measure has not been recommended for our community at this time, but we are certainly keeping abreast of the latest updates and encourage you to do the same. But I find it extremely ironic that this is the week we get the reading about the Woman at the Well from the Gospel of John because it's all about social distancing, in its own way.

First, the CDC would not approve of Jesus' first move. A strange woman comes up to the well, and he goes right up to her and asks to drink out of her water jar. The germs, Jesus! Think of the gerrms! Likely this foreign woman would have drank out of the jar herself, but this didn't stop Jesus from asking for a drink. So on a surface level, Jesus is just busting through personal boundaries here (a practice, just to be clear, we do not recommend you imitate at this time). But on a deeper level, we see Jesus dismantling the interpersonal "social distancing" that the community has imposed on this woman.

Jesus encounters her here, alone, coming at noon, in the heat of the day, to draw water from Jacob's well. In a town like Sychar, the well would have been a social gathering place. Fetching the water for the day was the task of the women, a task that would have ordinarily have been done early in the morning, before the heat of midday. The women would enjoy the opportunity to meet with each other, to catch up with each other, to share the day's news. This woman herself indicates the cultural significance of this watering-hole. It's not just any water source - It's the historic well established for the people by their ancestor Jacob. This is the historic town square, the social meeting place. And yet, here, she is, alone. Social distancing indeed.

We find out quickly why she is here in the midday fetching water alone. We find out because of Jesus' lack of social distance, his refusal to abide by the unspoken town rule that this woman was not to be associated with. After going back and forth about this water, that water, drawing water, living water, Jesus says to her: "Go, call your husband," knowing full well that she has lost five husbands, and is currently living with a man who will not marry her.

Ah... Now we're beginning to see the reason for her social isolation. She does NOT fit into societal norms, and has been relegated to the margins. None of the married women want to be seen with her and none of the unmarried women want their reputations to get tarnished by association. Many assumptions have been made over the years about the nature of this woman's unfortunate situation. How did she lose five husbands? Was it through death? Or divorce? In either case, she would have had no say in the matter. Over death, obviously, but as a woman in ancient times, she would have had just as little say over divorce. Not being married to the man she was with now was also a decision she had little power over, as that arrangement would have been initiated by the man as well.

Often throughout the years, people have labeled this woman a sinner. But if we pay close attention to the text, and try to check our assumptions at the door, we begin to see that she may just have been misfortunate. Either way, what Jesus sees in her is need for social connection, and what he does in revealing this is recognize her pain. In the beginning of this story, it's made evident that this woman has been hurt over and over again and in addition has been outcast from her community. But by the end of the story, as we will see, not only is she restored to her community, as she becomes a witness to them, but she is in a New Covenant relationship with

none other than Jesus, her Savior. By the end of the story, we'll see how through her, Jesus is breaking down human barriers in order to build up the kingdom. Once he reveals the woman's need for relationship and the reconciliations he brings, then, he begins to reveal who he is.

He hints at who he is, when he makes that offer to her of "living water." But then, when she brings up the M-word: Messiah, he lays it out for her, right then and there, in words so profound they get lost in translation from the Greek to English. She says, "Yes, I know that Messiah is coming..." And Jesus responds: "I AM." In English, we translate it "I am he," but what Jesus really says here are those two words uttered by the Almighty, After being implored by Moses at the burning bush, "Tell me, what is your name? Who shall I say sent me?" God replies: "I AM." Jesus is not only confirming to the woman at the well that indeed he is the Messiah, but with these two words he is indicating that he is also the Word made Flesh, the very incarnation of God.

This is an astonishing revelation. You may remember that in other instances in the Gospels, when the M-word is mentioned, Jesus orders - "sternly orders" it says in two places - his disciples not to tell anyone, at least until they see his identity fully revealed on the cross. In the few places where the title "Messiah" is ascribed to Jesus the pronouncement is found on the lips of the disciples, his inner circle. Yet here, we hear it proclaimed on the lips of a Samaritan (Which the author has already mentioned Jews are not friendly with). On top of that, this Samaritan is a WOMAN, and one who has been pushed so far to society's margin, that with one more false step, she's in danger of falling off the edge for good.

Wow, Jesus, is this really who you should be talking to? Is this the kind of person you really want your message to be associated with? Is this the kind of person you want going around claiming they have met the Messiah, the Lord? By the end of this story, we hear the answer loud and clear. By the end of this encounter, we see that Jesus' answer is YES. This is the kind of person he wants to be associated with. This is exactly the kind of person he set out to call in to his service. For he says "it is not the well who are in need of a physician, but the sick."

Last week, we heard all about John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." For God so loves the WORLD. Not just the insiders. Not just the God-fearing Jewish believers. God so loves the world. And just to show how true that really is, Jesus goes right into Samaria.

If he were truly a rule-following Jew, he would have avoided Samaria on his journey. If he were a strictly law-abiding adherent of Torah, he would have gone the long way around. But he didn't. He's on a mission to gather disciples, and that mission takes him straight into the heart of Samaria. The issue the Jews had with Samaritans, is that they are not just non-believers, they are different believers. They are not heathens, they are heretics, which by many definitions is worse. They are descendents of Jacob, like the Jews, They worship God, like the Jews, they even adhere to Torah, like the Jews, but...they're not Jews, they are a mixed-race spinoff group that full-blooded Israelites wanted nothing to do with.

And so, on his mission to demonstrate how God loves the world... Jesus goes straight into Samaria. Remember, in these days, when traveling, you'd have to rely on the hospitality of the locals. You'd have to go into their homes, to eat their food, you'd have to get up close and personal. Amid the current viral fears of the day, just suggesting that makes your skin crawl, doesn't it? But that's exactly what Jesus does - he goes in and asks for a drink from the Samaritan woman's jar. Jesus is in Samaria, and he's not just passing through, he's there to make friends. He's there to make a statement. He's there to make disciples.

"The hour is coming and is now here," Jesus says to the Samaritan woman, "when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him." "The Father seeks such as these to worship him." The Father is seeking worshipers. God's kingdom is now accepting newcomers.

God's Son is on the lookout for new disciples, and he won't let theological differences or patriarchal practices or judgmental social distancing stand in his way. Jesus is here in Samaria to reveal himself as the Messiah, to reveal in himself the Great I AM, to find those who will worship in Spirit and in Truth, and it doesn't matter what ethnic background you come from, it doesn't matter what tribe you belong to it doesn't matter your relationship status or social standing as long as you are with him. And she is. The woman at the well recognizes the presence of God in Jesus the Messiah, and she offers herself as a witness to him. She doesn't waste any breath discussing this decision with him either she drops her water jar, and runs back to tells others, "Come and See, Come and See!"

In this transformative encounter with Jesus the I AM This woman becomes not only a disciple, but an evangelist. She - a woman of Samaria - a discarded and unmarried woman at that - she has been chosen by Christ as a witness. While she's gone, witnessing to Jesus' identity to the people, the disciples return and begin to urge Jesus to eat something. They missed his whole exchange with the woman, and all they know is when they arrived, Jesus was tired from his journey. More concerned with this unfolding episode with his newest female disciple than with eating the food they had gone off to buy, Jesus tells them, "I have food that you do not know about." Basically he's saying, 'What I came here truly hungering for has already been satisfied.' "My food," he says, 'my spirit's nourishment,' "is to complete the work" of him who sent me.

What Jesus was truly hungering for at this stop in Samaria was to do God's work. What he was truly thirsting for was the outpouring of the word, which came not only from the revelation of his true identity to this woman, but is now gushing forth from her as she overflows with praise for the Messiah and with the proclamation to others to "come and see" the Son of God in their midst. What Jesus came here hungry for was to complete the work God sent him to do, to gather witnesses for his kingdom and to send them out to spread the good news to ALL people, not just in Judea, but in Samaria, and beyond. Doing his work feeds him, it reinvigorates him, in a way the food that perishes cannot. And we see that for those who hear and heed his call, it does the same. The woman who came to the well in the heat of the day to get water, abandons her jar and runs to the village, more refreshed than ever.

"Doing the work," participating in the mission, being a living witness for Christ does not deplete, like worldly work, but instead it invigorates. Becoming a witness - although it is not easy - is an endeavor that feeds and nourishes the soul, rejuvenates even the most depleted and poor in spirit. And what we see in this episode is that that's exactly who Christ calls into his service. Not just the perfect and perky...not just the popular and celebrated, but the depleted, the poor in spirit, the outcast, the unfortunate. ALL are welcome into this mission that we share All are welcome, all are loved, as our new church tagline states.

This Lent, as we reflect on our own limitations, our own need for repentance, on our own wilderness wandering, our own need to, as the prophet calls us, "RETURN to the Lord our God, for he is gracious and merciful," we realize that in spite of our wayward tendencies, in fact, perhaps, because of our shortcomings, God has called us to be his witnesses. "The well have no need for a doctor" So it is we, the sick, the broken, the frail, the pitifully human who come for healing to the Great Physician. We come to him for healing, and for our remedy, he gives us his work. We come to him for purpose, and for direction, Christ sends us out on HIS mission. He tenderly feeds us with the bread of life, which is his flesh for the sake of the world; he gently leads us to springs of living water, which overflow with mercy for us and for all who come to the well, looking for a place to belong.