

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: John 4:5-42

⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ 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.) ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ 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."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband,' ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ 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. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵ 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." ²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

²⁷ 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?" ²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" ³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." ³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." ³³ So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" ³⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² 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."

Jesus seems to meet some interesting people as he journeys from one place to another. He always seems to find himself with those who need his help—physical or spiritual. Yes, some come looking for him, like Nicodemus, whom I talked about in last Sunday's sermon. The Pharisee, Nicodemus, had some questions he wanted to ask Jesus. Perhaps he was looking for a deeper meaning and purpose for his relationship with God. But not everyone sought out Jesus. Some people just happened to be in the right place, at the right time, to have an encounter with Jesus, like the woman at the well in today's scripture reading.

Did you ever wonder why Jesus decided to travel to certain places; and how he chose his routes to get to those places? We know that at some point he knew he needed to head for Jerusalem in order to fulfill God's plan. But what about all those places he visited before making his final trip to Jerusalem.

Maybe he and his disciples just wandered about without any destination in mind. When Don and I were dating, and when gas was cheap, we often times went for drives without any destination in mind just for something to do. Another time, after we were married and before we had any children, we loaded up our little Yamaha 400 and took off for a week-long trip to who-knew-where. Before leaving we had decided to head west, but that was all we had decided. We ended up only getting as far as Ohio because of some very nasty weather further west of there. We found ourselves visiting some pretty-neat places like the pro-football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, Sea World, when there still was one, in Aurora, Ohio, and Niagara Falls. It was a fun and great adventure. I wonder, did Jesus and his disciples embark on their journeys like this. Or did God put a bug in his ear about where they should go?

We learn from the of scripture prior to what was read for us today is that The Pharisees were keeping a count of all the baptisms Jesus and John were doing, and it was getting to be a lot. They were sharing their count with the people, letting them know which of the two was in the lead with having done the most, and therefore, turning Jesus and John into rivals in the eyes of the people, likely in hopes of destroying their ministry. Jesus was on to this and decided it was time to move on from the Judean countryside and head north, to Galilee.

The gospel writer, John, tells us that they **had** to go through Samaria to get to Galilee, where they came to Sychar, a Samaritan village. This adventure took them into what was considered forbidden territory. The Samaritans were not high on the Jews' popularity list. In fact, they avoided traveling through Samaria unless it was necessary to do so. Now, if you look at a map of the area at that time, Samaria was between Judea and Jesus' destination of Galilee; so the most direct route was to go through Samaria, but he did not **need** to travel that route, at least not if one was following a map.

But John's use of a word translated as "had" reveals that this was not a geographical decision, but instead, a mission decision in accordance with God's plan. We don't know if Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen when he went that direction, but we do know that Jesus understood his mission for God was to reach not just the Jews, but all people. If you remember from the story of Nicodemus, Jesus stated that when to Nicodemus when he said that, "God so

loved the **world**", not just the Jews, "that he gave His only Son, so that **whoever** believes in him may not perish but may have everlasting life."

So, Jesus was not unwilling to venture into forbidden territory. He knew it was his mission to take the Good News to everyone. Now, the Samaritans were not unfamiliar with God, or even the promise of a Messiah. In the conversation between the woman at the well and Jesus, we hear evidence of this. Their roots dated back to a united Israelite community.

The division evolved from the time when the Samaritan capital of the Northern Kingdom was overtaken by the Assyrians. Many Jews were deported to Assyria, and foreigners were brought in to resettle the land and keep the peace. The intermarriage between those people and the Jews who remained there resulted in a mixed race, impure in the opinion of the Southern Kingdom Jews. The "pure" Jews despised the mixed race because the Jews felt the mixed race had betrayed their people and nation by allowing these mixed marriages. The Jews called the mixed race, Samaritans. The Samaritans then built an alternate worship center, much like Jerusalem, with a temple on Mount Gerizim, which the woman at the well mentions.

The Samaritans were not innocent of fueling the animosity between the two groups. The Southern Kingdom fell victim to the Babylonians and were carried into captivity. But 70 years later a remnant of 43,000 were permitted to return and rebuild Jerusalem. The Samaritans in the Northern Kingdom opposed this and tried to undermine the attempt to reestablish the nation. So, both sides helped to build the walls of bitterness between them. Yet, they both worshiped and sought to be obedient to the same God.

Does this sound vaguely familiar? It should. We find ourselves challenged in similar ways by living in a culture divided by ethnic and racial barriers. A writer for "The Word in Life Study Bible, New Testament Edition," names our challenge like this: "It is not the person from the radically different culture on the other side of the world that is hardest to love, but the nearby neighbor whose skin color, language, rituals, values, ancestry, history, and customs are different from one's own." Isn't that true?

Jesus would have no part in building the divide between the Jews and the Samaritans. He marched right into Samaria, taking the shortest route to Galilee...knowing full well he may find himself engaging in an interaction with a member of the so-called, "enemy".

And indeed, Jesus did have an encounter with a Samaritan, a woman, at noontime, at a well. The Samaritan woman was taken aback by Jesus' initiation of a conversation with her. She knew in doing so, Jesus was violating two societal rules. The first being that Jewish men did not initiate conversation with an unknown woman. Moreover, adding controversy to the encounter, Jewish teachers did not engage in public conversations with a woman, believing that in having a conversation with a woman could bring evil on himself, perhaps, I guess, through lustful thoughts, that would then cause him to neglect his study of the law.

Secondly, as I already mentioned, Jews did not participate, let alone begin a conversation with a Samaritan. It was feared that such conversations would sway one away from the pure Jewish faith. This makes me think of my own relationship with my Old Order Amish relatives. As a child, my parents, brother and I were invited to family holiday gatherings with the rest of our Amish relatives. That was until one of my aunts left the church. She and her husband had several children who were raised speaking the Dutch/German language they all spoke. My dad never taught it to us, so we had no way of understanding them if they spoke to us in anything other than English; and we could not communicate with the other children in the Dutch that all of the children spoke fluently. Her family was not invited to family gatherings because my Amish aunts and uncles did not want her children speaking to their children, for

fear of them possibly leading their children, “astray.” So, I guess to be fair, they stopped inviting us to family gatherings too.

Once again, Jesus would have no part in furthering these beliefs and practices. He saw a greater need. He saw a woman needing to have the theological conversation they had to further her faith journey, perhaps even, getting it back on the right track. This conversation is the longest of any that is recorded between Jesus and another person. The woman clearly had knowledge of God and the teachings of God; but something was missing, and Jesus knew this.

Jesus begins the conversation with the woman by asking for a drink. There’s something special about these simple reminders that Jesus was not only divine, but human with human needs. It makes him feel more down-to-earth to us. This simple request initiates a conversation into something deeper, a conversation about “living water” which only Jesus could supply.

The woman did not understand this at first, much like, Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus meant when he told Nicodemus that he needed to be reborn. For her living water likely led her to think about moving water, which was fresh and not stagnant, as what would be found in a cistern or well. Added to her confusion was the fact that Jesus had just asked her for a drink; so if he had water of his own, better water than she had to offer, why then did he need water from what she could draw up from the well?

Once again, as with the case of Nicodemus, Jesus was speaking about satisfying a spiritual need and providing spiritual growth. This time he was associating the longing for God with thirst, which was not a new concept. There are many occasions in the Old Testament when writers like the Psalmist, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Zechariah speak of thirsting after God just as one thirsts for water. There’s a longing for a closeness to God, a spiritual satisfaction that the physical and cultural world cannot provide. In Psalm 36:9, God is called the fountain of life; and in Jeremiah 17:13 God is called the spring of living water.

Jesus told the Samaritan woman that he could give her this living water, water that could forever quench a person’s thirst for God; and at the same time, Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah. Only the Messiah could give this gift that satisfies the soul’s desire. The woman asks him to give her this living water, but at that moment, she still does not understand what Jesus meant. That’s when he reveals that he knows things about her that he could not have known without some kind of divine intervention.

Jesus knew the woman had been married five times and that the man she was living with at the time was not her husband. This makes things a little sticky for us because we automatically begin to think this woman must have been some kind of a low-life, scum of the earth kind of person. Adding to that persona is the fact that she was getting water from the well at noontime. Most women went for water at the well earlier in the day when it was cooler. It makes one wonder whether she was avoiding the unpleasantness she might experience from others who disapproved of her.

The truth is that, John doesn’t tell us the circumstances that brought about losing five husbands. Did they die? Did they choose to divorce her? It was not easy for a woman to obtain a divorce at that time. The husband initiated a divorce. Was she unfaithful? We don’t know.

What seems to be important here is that at this point, she recognizes that Jesus is someone special; and perhaps to redirect the attention of Jesus away from her past, she redirects the conversation towards a popular theological issue, the correct place to worship, pointing out that the Jews claim that Jerusalem is where all need to come to worship God. Jesus quickly responds saying the location of worship is not nearly as important as the attitude of those who worship God. Jesus places the focus back on her personal relationship with God. He tells her

God is spirit, and so she can worship him in spirit anywhere. Essentially, he tells her she can have a relationship with God anywhere, at any time.

Driving home the point then, Jesus reveals to her that he is the promised one she knew to expect one day, the Messiah. He wanted her to know that he is the One who would bring the people back to God. This woman was the very first person in John's gospel that Jesus ever told he was the Messiah. As she ponders this, she leaves Jesus and begins to tell others about him, asking if it is possible that Jesus in fact is the Messiah.

This woman then, whom we quickly assume to be low-life, must have had some integrity in the community for them to listen to her and follow her to where Jesus was and to listen to Jesus teach. If she didn't, her message fell onto curious ears. They went to see Jesus and even begged him to stay with them longer, which he did, two more days, in fact. Many became believers, not necessarily because of what she said, but because they went on to seek out Jesus and listened to him.

We learn that upon the disciples return to Jesus from getting food, they were surprised, perhaps, even dismayed to find Jesus talking with the woman at the well. They questioned him about this and encouraged him to leave her and come with them to eat. He told them he wasn't hungry. He said he didn't need the food they had for him. The food that satisfied his hunger was spiritual food he obtained by doing God's will.

What then are we to take from our study of what happened here. I think we can agree that we are challenged to ask ourselves, where are we unwilling to go and who do we avoid meeting so that we don't need to talk with them about anything, let alone spiritual matters? Who at your job, at your school, in your neighborhood are you avoiding instead of engaging them with hospitality, that may lead to spiritual conversations, maybe even giving you an opportunity to extend an invitation to them to meet Jesus where they can drink the living water he has to offer? Jesus, through example and his words to the disciples, makes it clear to us that this serves not only to bless others, but also our service and evangelizing to others, is food, nourishment for our spirits.

But maybe before this, we need to find ourselves in the story, as the woman at the well, meeting Jesus. There we recognize that Jesus sees us, the good, the bad and the ugly, he knows everything about us and yet accepts us, forgives us and wants all of us to drink of the living water that he offers us. He came so that we might know God. It doesn't matter who we are or what we have done, he came that we might be forgiven and drink from the living water of God. We are made fresh and new because of Jesus.

It is in recognizing our own frailties and need for God's saving grace then that we, are freed from our inhibitions about reaching out to those we know who have traveled down a sinful path, those who are different than us, those we've been taught to avoid because they are different, in skin color, language, rituals, values, ancestry, history and customs. It is through our connectedness with Jesus, that like him we will see the need of others to know him, so that they too can be invited through our efforts to drink the living water he offers leading to God's grace and love.

Charlotte Elliott was a sickly English woman who had developed a long history of refusing to do things she was asked to do because of her illness. Her brother, who was a pastor, had been particularly persistent in trying to get her out of herself, trying to get her involved in doing something positive. But Charlotte had always refused. "I'm not feeling up to it. I'm an invalid, you know. I just don't think I can."

In 1834 her brother asked one more time. They were trying to raise funds for a school for young women. Charlotte Elliott was asked to help ... at least just to go to the event and do something, anything. But again she refused, again she spoke of being too tired, too sick. And so the family all went off and left her home alone.

That night, Charlotte Elliott began to think about how sickness was taking over her life. She began to feel ashamed, because she would not risk anything for the Kingdom. She realized that that her brokenness had become the most important thing, maybe the only thing, in her life. And that night Charlotte Elliott heard the call of God. Out of her restlessness, out of her self-hatred, she wrote, "Just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me, and that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come. Just as I am, and waiting not... just as I am, with many a conflict, many a doubt. Yes, just as I am, poor, wretched, blind... just as I am, I come." Yes, I'm a mess, but I am coming. No more excuses. Without one plea.

In the dark moments of that night, I would say Charlotte was at the well with Jesus, and she was confronted in love, drank deeply of the living water offered to her, and learned that handicaps are not handicaps but challenges; that brokenness is but a step on the way to wholeness; that feeling like you are nothing is not a barrier to Kingdom service.

May we all see ourselves and others through the eyes of Jesus. Amen.