

**February 6, 2022**

**John 4:1-42**

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4 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John”<sup>2</sup> —although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—<sup>3</sup> he left Judea and started back to Galilee. <sup>4</sup> But he had to go through Samaria. <sup>5</sup> So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup> Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. <sup>7</sup> A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” <sup>8</sup> (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) <sup>9</sup> 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.) <sup>10</sup> 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.” <sup>11</sup> The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?” <sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” <sup>13</sup> Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup> 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.” <sup>15</sup> 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.”

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

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

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

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

When John and I first learned we were to be grandparents, knowing that our grandchildren would be surrounded by an entire village of people who could not wait to shower them with all the things, we decided we needed a gift-giving plan. We could not allow ourselves to buy them every cool thing that came along and we knew we would be tempted to do just that. So, we decided for birthdays and Christmas we would buy each grandchild:

1 thing to wear

1 thing to read

1 thing to play with

1 thing to do

This week, as I was putting together the sermon slideshow, I went looking for pictures to go with each of the things on the list. I planned to shamelessly show y'all pictures of our grandsons wearing the cute things, while read the books and played with the toys we had given them. I scrolled through my phone's camera roll that is filled with grandchild pictures and with very few exceptions, all the pictures were of the experiences we gave them, the things to do.

There were so many pictures of trips to the museum, the zoo, ice cream dates, bike rides, swimming, baking, playing games, that I lost track of time as I scrolled through them. I was reminded that the best things in life are not things, not the things to wear or read or play with, they are people and the experiences we have with them.

Today's story tells of the way in which Jesus and a Samaritan woman experienced each other. And I hope it will encourage us to think about the ways in which we experience God in our own lives. You will remember, Jesus had been in Jerusalem. That is where he met Nicodemus whom we talked about a couple weeks ago. He left there to head back to Galilee. The text says, "But he had to go through Samaria." That statement makes it sound like the only way to get back to Galilee was to go through Samaria. That's not true.

In fact, there were two routes from Jerusalem to Samaria that were typically used by the Jewish people and neither of those included going through Samaria. One was along the Mediterranean Sea, the other along the Jordan River. They would have avoided going through Samaria altogether. Why? The rift between the Jews and Samaritans was complex, but it boiled down to a difference in belief about the proper place to worship. The Jews believed it was Jerusalem, the Samaritans believed it was Mount Gerizim. A Jew that encountered a Samaritan was instantly unclean. Samaria would have been the last place a Jew would have expected Jesus to go and the last place they would have imagined God's love to be revealed...the very last place.

Jesus went through Samaria not out of geographical necessity, but theological necessity. Let me explain. Remember in the story of Nicodemus we talked about the familiar verse, John 3:16, "For God so loved the world..." And remember I mentioned that the Greek word we translate for world is the word from which we get "cosmos." The "world" in that text represents all of creation, including the ones who cannot imagine themselves as objects of God's love and the ones whom

we struggle to love. Luther Seminary's Dr. Karoline Lewis says it this way, "The 'world' here also has a sense of 'to the ends of the earth,'" thus representing the abundance of God's love. God loves even those on the margins, the peripheries, the outer boundaries of the centralized community. This would have been a critical claim for the first hearers of this Gospel, struggling with their own reality of excommunication and the question of whether God's love could still be for them and even reach them in the outskirts of community and identity."<sup>1</sup> The authors used a woman in Samaria as a symbol of how far God's love and presence really go...everywhere and to everyone.

Jesus met the woman at the well at noon, the lightest and brightest time of day. Many of us, I would guess, learned that the timing of the woman's visit to the well was a statement about her morality. We learned she went to the well to avoid other people because she was embarrassed by her past and by who she was in the present.

And to go right along with that idea, very often, artists depict the Samaritan woman wearing a red garment; red is often used in sacred art to symbolize promiscuity and moral weakness. The reference to the time of day in this text has nothing to do with the woman's life. Instead, it points to the theological theme of light and darkness which is a constant in this Gospel. Darkness represents the realm of unbelief and light represents the realm of belief. Remember the story of Nic @ Night. The fact that the Samaritan meets Jesus at noon suggests her conversation with Jesus will have a different outcome than Nicodemus', which ended with Nic unable to see that God was anything other than what he had been taught. He was unable to have an experience outside of what he understood.

As the conversation unfolded, we see that, like in his conversation with Nicodemus there is a willingness by Jesus to answer the Samaritan woman's questions. There is a give and take between them which begins with the first words from Jesus' mouth, "Give me a drink." It isn't only the woman who comes to the well with a need; Jesus needs something too. From a theological perspective, the two needed each other. Jesus needed her to be a witness his revelation of God in the world and she needed Jesus to invite her into this new identity. This story models the mutual relationship God desires with all of us. God is our Creator, the One who loves us into being and loves us into becoming who we were created to be. We certainly need God for that. And God needs us as

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, Karoline, *Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries: John*, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 54.

God's representatives on earth. Our job is to be the caretakers of all of creation: the earth, the creatures with whom we share the earth, and each other. We need God and God needs us.

During their conversation, Jesus told the woman to call her husband and come back. She responded, "I have no husband." Jesus said, "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!" Last week, during the Taizé service, you were invited to reflect on the sound of Jesus' voice. I wonder how you imagine his tone of voice at this point in the conversation.

I've read this text in a variety of settings with adults and teenagers. Almost always the person reading out loud uses a very stern voice when they read Jesus' words here. "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..." Many of us imagine Jesus scolding the woman in this moment. This morning as I was reading the text again, I had a memory of hearing this story read as a young person and thinking it was weird that Jesus was so mean to her. It was weird because that's not the best reading of this text and here is why. In that time and place, women had little control over their own lives. The woman's five husbands had either died or they had divorced her. When a divorce happened, it was not the woman's choice; it was the man's. And very often, the reason for the divorce was the woman's inability to bear a child...also not her choice or her fault. It is likely the man she was living with was her last husband's brother, who was obligated to care for his dead brother's wife. You can read about that practice in Deuteronomy 25:5-10.

In light of that, I imagine Jesus' voice as the voice of a compassionate pastor, who didn't use the truth about the woman's life as a weapon, but as a balm for healing. The Samaritan woman had not had an easy life. Five husbands...each death or divorce a threat to her security, chipping away at her sense of worth. And the truth was, God so loved her. Let's compare her, for a moment, to Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was a man, the Samaritan, a woman.

We know Nicodemus' name. The Samaritan woman is unnamed.

He was a religious leader. She was a religious outsider.

Nic met Jesus at night. The woman met him at noon.

Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus happened in Jerusalem during the Passover Festival, while the Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus took place in Samaria.

And here is the big one:

While both encounters began with misunderstanding and a lot of questions, Nicodemus remained in the metaphorical darkness and the woman stepped into the light of relationship and discipleship.

The comparison slide helps us see why these two stories were placed side by side in the Gospel of John. They have a message for us about the world "God so loves." It is a world where people who have been marginalized and kept on the outside are brought into relationship and given a new identity and reminded that they have a place and a purpose. They are reminded of God's preference always toward "the least of these." This is all so very hard for us to understand amid a culture that places high value on the things...money, expensive toys and degrees that are out of reach for so many people. God, though, places high value on people and especially the ones the world says don't matter. And I think this is good news for all of us because I think there are times when each one of us feels like we don't matter.

When we are very young and when we are very old.

When we have tried our best and nobody notices.

When we have done all the work in the background and someone else gets the "thank you."

When our opinion is in the minority or when we are the lone voice.

At all these times and all the other ones...you matter to God. That is really hard to understand, even for the ones who spend our lives studying God.

Here's what I was reminded of this week though. We aren't supposed to understand God. That may come as a shock to many of us who are most comfortable thinking and crunching the data. We are not supposed to understand God. We are supposed to experience God and that's what tripped Nicodemus up. He couldn't allow himself to have the experience. For him, God could be nothing other than law and tradition. He understood God, but was unable to experience God, to imagine that there was something new waiting to be born in him and through him. The Samaritan woman allowed herself to have the experience and, even though it was confusing and weird, she was willing to go with it, to bear witness to the new thing God was doing in her. She would tell other people, and

they would believe, not because of what she told them, but because Jesus hung around for two days and they experienced it for themselves.

I confess, though I am a professional theologian, I do not understand God. I think of the psalmist that wrote about a God who knows us intimately, "...such knowledge is too wonderful for me." But I have experienced God enough to know what God feels like. This week, I had the opportunity experience God a lot... DCC hosted the Home for the Night emergency shelter. And though the shelter was a community response and not a faith-based shelter, I experienced God constantly.

Volunteers-presence, no agenda, listening ears, problem solvers

Meal Preparers-so much food

Guests-grateful, shared themselves with us, vulnerable, asked for help

Community Partners-"Whatever you need..."

Home for the Night was a soft place to land for all of us who maybe had forgotten that we need each other. It was a space where everyone was welcome and, thanks to the generosity of so many, there was more than enough of everything to go around and especially, there was a place at the abundant table for everyone.