

“Worship in Spirit and Truth”
March 12, 2023
First Presbyterian Church, Lynchburg
Rev Dr. Nancy Dawson, Parish Associate

Background - Nancy

Let me share some background first.

The Pharisees heard that Jesus and His disciples were gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, the Baptizer. The Pharisees were jealous. When Jesus learned of this, He decided to leave Judea in the Northern Kingdom and go back to Galilee in the Southern Kingdom. But to get there, he had to go through Samaria. When the Northern Kingdom was conquered by Babylon, many of the Jews were taken into captivity. But some were left behind. The king of Assyria sent in foreigners to occupy the country. These people intermarried with the Jews, and partly adopted the Jewish laws and worship traditions.

The one major area of contention was where official worship should take place. Jewish laws restricted worship to be only in the temple in Jerusalem. However, those living in the Northern Kingdom insisted that they could worship just as well, in the city of Shechem (later known as Sychar). So, a temple was built on Mount Gerizim and a city was constructed that rivaled Jerusalem.

Because the Samaritans worship traditions went against the traditional Jewish tradition and the fact that the Samaritans were not 100% Jewish in parentage due to intermarriage with the Assyrian invasion they were contemptuously rejected by the Jews and were compared to Gentiles. Consequently, they were excluded from the Jerusalem Temple causing great conflict and enmity between the two races and they essentially avoided dealing with each other.

While Jesus sat near the well, a Samaritan woman came to draw water and Jesus made a request of her. This was quite unusual as Jews and Samaritans did not interact with one another. Plus, it was frowned upon for men and women to relate unless they were married.

This is where we pick up our story this morning. And thank you to Alex and Marcia for bringing this encounter to life

Listen to the WOL

Nancy - So 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 while His disciples went into the city to buy food. It was about noon, the hottest part of the day and a very unusual time to come to the well to draw water.

Alex - *“Give me a drink.”*

Marcia (Respond with sarcasm) “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”

Alex – (Patiently and kindly) “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.”

Marcia (again with disdain) “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep here. Where do you get this living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks, drank from it?”

Alex – (Patiently and slowly) “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.”

Marcia (Pleading and urgent) “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Alex - (In a simple tone of request) “Go, call your husband, and come back.”

Marcia – (With regret) “I have no husband.”

Alex - You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is you have had five husbands, and the man you have now is not your - husband. What you have said is quite true!”

Marcia - “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.”

Alex - “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.

Alex - 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.”

Marcia “I know that the Messiah is coming” the one who is called the Christ. “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.”

Alex – “I am He, the one who is speaking to you.”

Nancy - Meanwhile the disciples return and are amazed that Jesus is talking with a Samaritan woman.

Marcia – walk toward the congregation and say with excitement, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He knew I had been married 5 times and he didn’t rebuke me or anything. He simply asked ME for a drink of water and then began talking about living water that he will give. This living water, he said, will become a spring of water welling up in the person who drinks it and it will bring them eternal life And then when I declared my belief that the messiah is coming, he acknowledged, I who speak to you am HE. Could he be the Christ?’ Come and see!

Narrator – and they came out of the town and made their way toward him.

This is the word of God for the People of God,
Thanks be to God!

All been to grocery store and seen (*hold up can*) cans crushed or dented, torn labels. They don’t look good but are still edible. If, however the can is punctured – the contents are most likely spoiled and should not be purchased. But if the can is just dented or the label torn – it is still OK.

Often, grocery stores will fill a cart with damaged goods at reduced prices. Made me think of the woman at the well. A Samaritan - woman - divorced more times than the law allowed, shamed and shunned by community. Know this because she had to come draw water at the worst part of day to avoid whispers, looks, rebukes.

She goes to the well at noon - sun high and heat stifling, eyes of community she was damaged goods but in eyes of Jesus she was special. Special enough to break every code in the book and he treated her like human being, not like worthless junk. He treated her with respect and dignity,

like valued goods, not damaged ones. Not customary for Jewish men to talk with women unless they were married.

Secondly, he was a Jew, and she was a Samaritan. When he spoke, she was far less than friendly, “What do you a Jew want of me, a woman of Samaria?” In one sentence, she drew a line in the sand and highlights the racial and gender codes of the day. It is not a very flattering remark, for in a sense it chastises Jesus for his behavior. But he ignores her rude remark, and instead gets to the heart of the matter. “If you had known who was asking you for water, you would have asked him instead for living water.” Jesus knew what she needed. Not water that comes from a well in the ground, but living water that comes from the well of God.

The women, unaware of what Jesus was telling her could only respond with a literal remark, and in a way seems to be poking fun at Jesus. “Go on,” she chides, “this is a deep well and you haven’t even got a bucket.” Then she picks up on his theological tone and goes on to challenge him, “Do you think you are better than our father, Jacob?” It is hard to miss the irony in her sarcasm. Jesus, not to be dissuaded from his purpose, does not take the bait, instead he changes the direction and asks her to get her husband. In one quick question he exposes her dark side, the one area of her life where she is most vulnerable.

His question disarms her and she replies honestly, "I have no husband." She doesn't try to hide her immoral behavior, and she doesn't make excuses. She owns up to the reality of her life and speaks the truth.

How many times had she been told she was damaged goods? And here it was again. Her sin followed her everywhere. Ours do, too, but maybe not so obviously. We may manage to hide them from the eyes of family, friends and co-workers, but never from the eyes of God. Scripture tells us that God knew our need for a savior before we ever sinned. This woman makes no pretense with Jesus. She names reality as it is, and in doing so takes the first step in opening herself honestly to God.

This is when God's blessings begin to flow. For God cannot do a good work in us, unless we are honest about who and what we are. Sinners in need of a Savior. Jesus replies, "What you say is true - you do not have a husband. You've had 5 husbands and the one you are living with now is not your husband." Note that Jesus does not shake his finger at her and give her a lecture on what an evil person she is. Instead, he acknowledges the truth, and brags on her for being honest. Jesus is like that with us, too. When we confess, he doesn't beat us up. He welcomes our confession and loves us for being honest. We see here Jesus honestly confronting the woman's brokenness and cutting through to the very core of her need. She did what many of us do when conversations get too close, she changed the subject to religion.

In doing so she shifts the conversation from herself to traditions of the faith and to the crux of the conflict between Jews and Samaritans. The woman says, "My Samaritan ancestors worshipped God on this mountain, but you say that Jerusalem is the place where we should worship." But once again, Jesus doesn't let the conversation stray too far from her real need; her need for forgiveness and grace. Her need for a close relationship with God. Her need to worship Jesus in Spirit and in truth. "I am He," Jesus says, "I am the Messiah."

Instead of leaving her in the muck of theological codes and mumbo jumbo, he speaks directly to her need for forgiveness and wholeness. He tells her this is available through the living water of God. The woman at the well was like a plant that had been neglected. She was dry and wilted by the events of life. She was damaged beyond hopes of repair and had little care for herself, anymore, until she met Jesus, a man with a green thumb when it comes to people. Jesus accepted her as a valuable human being. He reached out to her even though she was a woman, a Samaritan and a sinner. He spoke to her of God and he offered her his blessing. For he had the water and the grace that she needed.

Quite a story of a life transformed through the power of love. (*hold up can*). The truth is that unless cans are actually punctured, there is really nothing wrong with them. It's just bent up a little. On the inside it is as good as the smooth ones on the shelves because it is what is on the inside that counts. Jesus knew this and knew that we need to be open to God's Spirit, and to be truthful with ourselves and with God about the sins in our life. Yet, all too often we try to hide from ourselves and from God. We only see ourselves and others by what is on the outside. With all the dents and missing and torn labels. And we miss what is on the inside.

God's eyes do not stop on the outside. God sees our needs, our thirst, and our worth as children of God. God calls us to see others that way as well.

In the story Jesus offers the woman living water. We celebrate that living water when we welcome a child or adult into the family of faith through baptism. The water we use is ordinary tap water that we ask God to set aside for a holy or anointed purpose. As such, it reminds us of the healing and cleansing power of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. In it we can see visibly the work that God is able to do inside of us. Wash us clean of sin. Nourish us with God's Spirit that we may grow and thrive in the faith. Renew our lives and make us whole again.

It is easy in our society today to forget that our wholeness comes from God. The message of the world is that our value, our esteem comes from our jobs, family possessions, finances, power or prestige. That we are only good if we appear to be perfect on the outside. Truth is that our goodness comes from within. From God's Spirit living within us. And the fact that we were created in God's image and likeness. We claim that promise as we come to God honestly confessing our sins and trusting in Christ to forgive them. For Christ alone gives us mercy and grace. God says to you and to me, "Come out of that basket full of damaged goods. For you are not damaged goods. You have been bought with a price. And you are mine."

AMEN