

Sermon "A People of Faith"
Kirk of St James
Sunday March 12, 2023
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

I was thinking about different times I have been offered hospitality during my travels and study. Oftentimes I was staying with host families or travelling through remote areas. Before our first semester abroad at St Stephen University one lesson they wanted us to take to heart was no matter what we were given we were to be both respectful and thankful because they had given us the gift of hospitality. Sometimes this was easy in places like Nicaragua with fresh pineapples or, in Thailand with mangos and tamarind right off the tree. There were shocking instances like Hungary where my first meal with a Hungarian grandmother started with cold fruit soup and ended when she pulled out a bottle of vodka. And there were times where it was just a challenge. I have never been so stretched as one remote place in Southeast Asia where it was chicken feet, river snails and ant eggs. Not things we have on the menu after church today! While not always familiar each dish was offered in kindness and welcome, and that was something to be grateful for. Welcome and hospitality are an incredible gift. In the ancient world these things were also important but due to beliefs and divides not always offered, as the story in John today tackles. When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman it is not clear what will happen. What will he say to her and about her? This could be an insignificant moment, or become quite explosive.

This passage is one of the more revealing passages about Jesus. Following on the heels of educated Nicodemus meeting Jesus in the middle of the night, we have an unnamed Samaritan woman sitting at a well in broad daylight. We are meant to notice the contrast between the two figures. The leader, the insider, the powerful figure sneaks into the story like a shadow while the religious, social, and political outsider meets Jesus midday. There are countless moments in John's gospel where people fail to recognize who Jesus is—including his own disciples. As one writer described "The unnamed woman at Jacob's well in Sychar and all of Jesus' disciples find themselves initially within this

number. Some never come to know who he is. In her conversation with Jesus the Samaritan woman slowly moves from unbelief to belief, from darkness to light, from blindness to sight, from ignorance to knowledge, from misunderstanding to understanding. Unlike Nicodemus she has seen nothing of Jesus' signs previously and has not heard he is a teacher "who has come from God." The Jesus she first encounters at Jacob's well is only a thirsty Jewish stranger who dares to ask her for a drink."

When we talk about this passage we cannot underestimate how scandalous and shocking this request is. In the ancient world there was a bitter divide between Judea and Samaria. People from these two countries would never have spoken to each other. On top of this political divide there was also a gender divide; a single young man like Jesus would almost never speak to a woman alone. There would also have been purity laws to take into consideration, and the text itself notes that Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans. The most likely scenario for this midday meeting was that the two strangers would pass by one another never stopping to speak, or to take notice of one another. However, as the unnamed woman begins the arduous task of drawing water to carry home the stranger leans over and asks her for a drink. She was likely so startled that she almost dropped her bucket. She would have stopped and looked at him more closely trying to figure out if she had misread the situation and who he was. She is still so flabbergasted that she points out how odd the request is to Jesus--just in case he has not figured it out.

Jesus knows exactly who she is and what she has done and he is not concerned. Instead he begins to teach, holding out a new hope and faith to her that she has never heard before. I have been thinking about this moment a lot this week and it raises a couple questions for me. The first is what does this passage say about Jesus and the second is what is our response to him?

If we were to look at an honest biblical representation of Christ, this passage in John is one of our best examples. In this account Jesus gets to the heart of the gospel. He teaches and he shares the good news of living water. He is direct in his responses to her life, and more than anything he breaks

down barriers and stereotypes--a common occurrence during his ministry. In the beginning people thought the Messiah was only there to save a certain group of people, and in turn believed that there was a careful line drawn around who was in and who was out. Yet Christ in his teaching breaks down every one of those barriers. It does not matter where you are from. It does not matter what your political background is. It does not matter what your gender is. What matters to Jesus is that everyone hears the good news. He casts his net beyond what anyone could have imagined. Certainly more so than the poor Samaritan woman thought. Jesus is not just sharing a bucket of water at a well; he is sharing the good news of salvation. When the disciples come back from town they are astonished to see him speaking with her--it does not make sense.

Once in an evangelism class we covered a case study on a church that was doing outreach work. A car full of older ladies set out from the church to go door to door. They were gone longer than people expected and when they later returned and told people where they had been people got upset. Surely they did not go to that part of town; it was supposed to have been left out of their efforts because nothing good could come of it. In the end the outreach work the car full of woman started that day had a huge impact both on that area of their community and their church as they grew together. No one is outside the grace of God and Jesus does not fence faith off. Rather, anyone who is willing to hear is welcome. It is good sometimes to ask ourselves if we have either consciously, or perhaps even more likely unconsciously drawn boundaries around our faith and belief. Is there is anyone we place outside the grace of God and if so why? Up until that moment the disciples would have said Samaritans, now Jesus has them rethinking everything.

The second question is how do we respond to the teaching of Christ. While this is often a question we think about as a church I have found that it has become even more important after the last three years. With covid disrupting our lives and routines it has forced us to look at our lives and faith in new ways. I don't know how you feel, but I feel as though in some ways the last three years have been

stuck in a holding pattern. We were limited by public health rules (for good reason), we were cautious so we could keep ourselves and others safe, and it was difficult to know what to do. In some ways thinking about new potential ministry opportunities, and how we live our faith were put on the back burner. Over the last few months it has started to feel like the tide is turning, ideas and ministry outreach ideas are starting to flow. Sessions' letter to the city about the importance of reception centres was taken seriously. Small ripples, that hopefully continue to flow out. Over the next months we will be giving serious thought to ministry opportunities, ideas, and dreams for our church. We will be looking to see what ideas you might have to share. We will be looking for ways to meaningfully connect, and to vision for the future. It has been a difficult few years but, we are reminded of God's call in our lives.

We live under grace, and we as a church want to extend grace. I believe oftentimes there is a disconnect between what we do as a church and how people understand us in the community. That is one of the reasons we rent our space to such a wide variety of people. By offering a wide variety of events and opportunities we can welcome community members in a way that is not threatening for them. For example we offer space to a lot of different groups like N/A, musicians, a yoga studio, the Fringe Festival etc. just so people can come through the doors and get to know us. We also try to work in the community. When we talk about it at a committee level I know our folks will offer love and grace in whatever way they can. I think if we are talking about a scriptural depiction of Jesus that is the best response we can offer--no one is outside the grace of God!

While in Cuba I was watching people stand on shore and cast nets by hand and then pull them back in. When I read this passage about how Jesus reaches out I picture him casting a net like those fishermen but, it goes wider and farther than I could ever imagine. He then pulls each of us in, and looks at our lives just as he did the Samaritan woman, and while we may expect condemnation, or a hard word instead we find ourselves like the unnamed woman "Come see a man who told me

everything I ever did...and loved me anyway." Those four words are not spoken but, I think it is safe to say that in her response that was her experience. God loves us. He meets us where we are at, whether it is a well, or our workplace, or sitting in the garden, or somewhere else entirely. He looks at us, picks us up, dusts us off, and says "I love you." We are so changed by that love that we then go out our driveway and into the world not with any fences but, just the open world before us and we share the joy of getting to know God as we do. This third week of lent may your hearts be filled to overflowing with love for God who first loved us. May that love continue to change your life, and fill your soul, and bring you so much joy that you just have to share it with others.

