

March 12, 2023
Lent 3

John 4:5-42
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“All the Children of the World”

“Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I have ever done.’”

“Jesus loves the little children, all the little children of the world.”

We sang this beloved song frequently in our Sunday school class at St. Peter’s, not realizing at the time that we were blocks away from a neighbourhood that many people in my community went out of their way to avoid. Even though Plainfield and North Plainfield were separated by a narrow brook, the two communities had very little contact with each other, most due to the racial composition of each community. People would often drive miles out of their way to avoid traveling through Plainfield, believing that driving through that city was fraught with danger. We also had very little contact with the children of our neighbouring city; our schools never played each other in sports, and the Lutheran churches in both communities rarely joined together for any events. Other than the YMCA, we had no contact with the children of Plainfield, even though we sang that children of all races and colours were *“precious in his sight; Jesus loves the little children of the world.”*

The divisions that existed in my home community were similar to the circumstances that are presented to us in today’s Gospel lesson, where we find Jesus in Samaria, a place where his people would go out of their way to avoid. John even informs his readers that *“Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans”* (John 4:9). The source of the enmity between these neighbouring groups dated back to the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom in the Eighth Century BCE; some of the people of Israel who were captured eventually married Assyrian partners, and these mixed marriages were seen as an abomination by the Jewish people. Another source of animosity was a dispute about the correct location for worship; while the people of Israel worshiped in Jerusalem, the center of worship for the Samaritans was at Mt. Gerezim, which was destroyed by Jewish troops in 128 BCE. The schism between Jews and Samaritans continued into Jesus’ time; *“for centuries, Samaritans and Jews occupied neighbouring lands and practiced similar religions while actively expressing feelings of animosity toward one another.”* (Jennifer Garcia Bashaw).

The land of the Samaritans was located between the Jewish provinces of Judea and Galilee, but most Jews traveled far out of their way to avoid setting foot on Samaritan soil. But when Jesus takes this trip, John reports that *“he had to go through Samaria”* (4:4). The Fourth Gospel often uses the phrase “had to” to indicate a

necessity due to the Father's Will (*"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."* – 10:16). Jesus purposely travels through Samaria, and his encounter at the well will show how this is in fulfillment of the Will of God who *"so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life."* (3:16).

Jesus' travels through Samaria bring him to the city of Sychar, which John reports is *"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."* (4:5-6). The references to Jacob and his well introduce the patriarchal traditions that will figure prominently in the conversation with the woman he will meet at the well; *"Jesus is tired from his journey, and he arrived at the well in the heat of the day."* (Gail O'Day). Jesus is alone at the well when suddenly *"a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.'"* (4:7). The woman's appearance is surprising, because water was usually drawn in the morning or evening, not in the noonday heat; drawing water was also a communal event, but the woman appears alone. Another surprise in the story is Jesus' addressing the woman at a time when men would not speak to women other than their wives, and Jewish men would never speak to a Samaritan woman. Yet Jesus overlooks all of these social mores when he requests a drink of water from this stranger, recalling the story of Elijah's request of the widow of Sidon in which a Jewish man makes a request of a Gentile woman:

- *"So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, 'Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.' As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, 'Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.'" – 1 Kings 17:10-11.*

The parallels between Elijah and Jesus suggest the image of Jesus as a prophet, which will come up in his ensuing conversation with the woman, who responds to Jesus' request with amazement, because it violates two societal conventions: a Jewish man did not initiate conversation with an unknown woman, and Jews did not invite contact with Samaritans. *"A fear of ritual contamination developed into a prohibition of all social intercourse."* (O'Day).

Instead of answering the woman's question directly when she asks *"how is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"* (4:9), Jesus invites her to answer her question herself: *"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"* (4:10). If the woman could recognize the identity of the person with whom she speaks, a dramatic reversal will take place: the woman will be the one

who requests water. This “living water” (*hydor zōn*) can mean fresh, running water or life-giving water; it is another Greek word with a double meaning (like *anōthen* in 3:3, which means both “again” and “from above”). The woman at first only hears one meaning (like Nicodemus), thinking of “running water” as she responds “*sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?*” (4:11). Since Jesus has no visible means with which to draw water, the woman’s question seems to imply that only a miracle similar to that of Jacob could provide that water: “*Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?*” (4:12; Genesis 29:1-14).

- “The woman’s reply, ‘Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well?’ focuses on the common ground of the Israelite history they share. With this shared foundation, Jesus begins to reveal more about his messianic identity, something he has done very little thus far in John.” – Bashaw.

Jesus responds to the woman’s challenge by focusing on the permanent effect of the two waters on thirst. Jacob’s gift was miraculous, but it could not assuage thirst permanently, for “*everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again*” (4:13). Jesus’ gift of “living water,” is different, for “*those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty again*” (4:14), recalling the water of which Isaiah speaks when he invites “*everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!*” (Isaiah 55:1). Jesus offers water that will give life; it is water that will “*become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life*”

- “I will open rivers in the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.” – Isaiah 41:18.

The woman responds enthusiastically to Jesus’ words (“*Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water*” – 4:15), but her enthusiasm misses the point of Jesus’ words. She continues to see Jesus through the categories of physical thirst and miraculous springs. While she recognizes neither Jesus’ true identity nor the fullness of his gifts, she is willing to receive what she thinks he is offering and hence to acknowledge her need for it.

This encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman takes a sudden and sharp turn when Jesus directs the woman to “*Go, call your husband, and come back.*” (4:16). While this makes little sense to us, the first Christians who heard John’s Gospel would have recognized the connection to both Jacob’s well and the significance of wells in the Old Testament. It was at this very well at midday that Jacob met his wife Rachel (“*Now when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his mother’s brother Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well’s mouth, and watered the flocks of his mother’s brother Laban. Then Jacob kissed Rachel*”

and wept aloud.” – Genesis 29:10-11). A generation before, Abraham’s servant had found Isaac’s wife, Rebekah, at a well (Genesis 24:15-21). The biblical scholar Robert Altar labels repeated settings like these “biblical type-scenes” and he calls the meeting at a well trope a “betrothal type-scene.” In this context, it is not unusual for Jesus to ask about the woman’s husband at a well at noon.

When the woman answers Jesus *“I have no husband,”* Jesus replies that *“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!”* (4:17-18). While many have interpreted this as evidence of the woman’s history of adultery and immorality, similar to the *“woman who had been caught in adultery”* (8:3). But there is no evidence of immorality on the woman’s part; Jesus does not judge her, and there may be many reasons for her marital history.

- “Neither Jesus nor the Gospel writer make a value statement about the five husbands; it is likely that the woman’s past is not her fault. As a woman, she could not initiate divorce; she could also have been widowed and remarried multiple times.” – Bashaw.

The woman could have been trapped in the custom of “levirate marriage,” in which the brother of a woman’s deceased husband is obligated to marry her (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). The conversation provides another example of Jesus’ ability to see and know all things, as happened when he greeted Nathaniel by declaring *“here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”* (1:47). Jesus’ insight into her words and life leads her to declare that *“sir, I see that you are a prophet”* (4:19), and to enter into a conversation with Jesus about the proper place of worship: *“Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”* (4:20). The woman initiates an act of deeper engagement with Jesus, because she anticipates that as a prophet Jesus will be able to speak an authoritative word on the subject. But instead of entering into a conversation as to whether the Jewish or Samaritan place of worship is the proper one, Jesus directs her attention away from the present to the future: *“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem”* (4:21). The phrase *“the hour is coming”* refers to the time of fulfillment of God’s promises for the future (*“Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.”* – 5:25). Jesus goes on to state that *“you worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews”* (4:22). This identification of the Jewish people as the source of salvation affirms the positive role of the Jews in salvation history. This salvation is being fulfilled in the presence of Jesus, a descendant of Abraham and of the covenant God made with him that *“through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”* (Genesis 12:3). In this salvation that

is present in the person of Jesus, true worship is no longer defined by place but by the manner in which God's people engage in worship: *"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."* (4:23). *"God is spirit,"* not bound to any place or people, and those who worship God share in the spirit; *"Jesus' presence changes the moment of anticipation into the moment of inbreaking, for 'the hour has come, and is now here'"* (O'Day).

In her response, the woman indicates that both Samaritans and Jews share an expectation of a Messiah when she proclaims that *"I know that Messiah is coming (who is called Christ). When he comes, he will proclaim all things"* (4:25). The Samaritans, like the Jews, anticipated the arrival of an eschatological figure called the *taheb*, who was seen as a teacher; a Samaritan document from the third century BCE stated that *"the Taheb will come and reveal the truth,"* the origin of the Samaritan woman's statement that *"when he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."* It also indicates that her expectations are still of a future Messiah; but Jesus responds that *"I am he, the one who is speaking to you"* (4:26), identifying himself as the one in whom God is known (*"No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."* – 1:18). This is the first of several "I am" statements in John, which include both affirmations in which Jesus simply says "I am" (*ego eimi*) and others where he uses images to help people understand his identity (*"I am the bread of life"* – 6:35). Jesus' identity as Messiah is the central truth of the Gospel of John *"so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name"* (20:31), and it is the only time in the Fourth Gospel that Jesus reveals his identity to another person. That the person he trusts himself to his a Samaritan and a woman is deeply significant both for John's first-century audience and for anyone who seeks to understand the gospel:

- "The gospel truth of Jesus' life is that he brings a new way of life, a way that results in all people – women and men, Samaritans and Jews, outsiders and insiders – worshiping in Spirit and in truth. The gospel becomes life changing for the Samaritan woman's neighbours when she tells them about the Messiah, and become the first and most effective of John's Gospel." – Bashaw.

While the disciples are astonished when they return and find Jesus speaking with a Samaritan woman, the woman departs from the well, leaving her water jar behind. She goes into town and witnesses to what she has seen and heard: *"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"* (4:29). "Come and see" is a crucial invitation in John's Gospel (*Philip said to [Nathaniel], 'Come and see.'* – 1:46). It is an invitation to participate in the life of faith, to experience Jesus for oneself. *"The woman offers her own experience as the*

basis for her witness and broaches the question of whether Jesus might be the Messiah.” (O’Day). The passage ends with John’s report of the success of the Samaritan mission, attributing the people’s faith to the woman’s “testimony” (*martyria*): “*Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I have ever done.’*” (4:39). They invite Jesus to stay with them, “*and he stayed there two days*” (4:40). “Stay” (*meno*) means to enter into a relationship with Jesus (“*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*” – 8:31-32). Many more persons come to faith in Jesus as a result of this stay, so that “*the witness that leads to Jesus is replaced by one’s own experience of Jesus*” (O’Day). Having heard for themselves, the Samaritans proclaim that “*we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world*” (4:42), the most sweeping Christological confession yet encountered in the Fourth Gospel. Salvation may come to the Jews, but it is not limited to the Jews; Jesus Christ is truly Lord of all, and Jesus loves “*all the children of the world.*”

- “As the Holy Spirit impresses upon us the utter giftness of God’s grace, two things begin to happen. First, we are overcome with awe and gratitude, and our trust in God grows into genuine freedom. We have nothing to fear from experiencing our need for God’s mercy. Second, we discover in ourselves a zeal to bring this good news to others. Like the Samaritan woman we want everyone to know Jesus, and we want to share with them what he has done for us.” – Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV.

Some of the simplest lessons we learn in Sunday school have the most profound meaning. As we sing with confidence that “*Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so,*” so do we also have the blessed assurance that “*Jesus loves the little children, all the little children of the world.*” Jesus’ mission involved passing through boundaries and divisions that kept people apart, for in his death and resurrection our Lord and Saviour has “*broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us ... so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace*” (Ephesians 2:14-15). As our Lord looks upon all of us with the loving eyes of one who loved the whole world so much that he gave his only Son so that we all might share in the gift of everlasting life, may we also look upon others with “*‘grace-healed eyes’ to see the potential in others for the same grace that God has so lavishly bestowed on us.*” (Philip Yancey).

Yes, Jesus loves me – and Jesus loves all the children of the world – even children in Samaria, in Plainfield, and in every place where the word of God is proclaimed fully and freely, so that all may know that the love of God in Jesus Christ is for everyone, for “*all the little children of the world.*”

Amen.