



Sunday's Sermon

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Growing Together in Christ to Love and Serve All People

Third Sunday in Lent

March 15, 2020

John 4:5-42

As you read this, keep in mind the people you will miss seeing in person during this time apart from each other.

Whenever we approach any situation involving people, we make assumptions. A lot of times, they're based on our life experiences. Like if we're going to a friend's home, we have an idea of what to expect in terms of how we'll be received and the things that we'll do there.

When we're out and about, our assumptions about what to expect sometimes shift. For example, we normally assume that traffic during commuting times is a nightmare. But this week, *if* you had to go anywhere your assumptions about the regular daily commute probably changed because traffic was unusually light.

Day in and day out, we make assumptions about what to expect, and sometimes those assumptions change.

It's the same when we read stories in the Bible. We make assumptions about the context - the way people act toward each other and the things that are said.

The woman in today's gospel reading has been burdened by assumptions throughout history. And most of them aren't favorable.

To start, she was from Samaria. Most of the time, we think of people from Samaria - better known as Samaritans - as "good". But Jesus' time, they weren't thought of as good at all. In fact, Judeans and Samaritans outright hated each other.

¹When the leaders of Israel were taken into exile in Babylon, the Samaritans are the ones who were left behind. They inter-married with other people living in the area, and kept their faith alive as best as they could without a temple or priests.

They told stories of the patriarchs and Moses and David and Solomon by word of mouth. And they worshipped at outdoor altars on mountaintops.

¹ Section on Samaritans taken from: <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2017/03/lectionary-blog-touching-lives-others>

But when the Israelites returned from exile, they wouldn't let the Samaritans help rebuild the temple. In fact, the Israelites wouldn't interact with the Samaritans at all. The Israelites had put so much effort into staying "pure" that they looked down on the people who hadn't.

So the Samaritans built their own temple. But the tension between the two groups continued to build, and eventually an Israeli army destroyed the Samaritan temple, leaving them to worship outdoors on a mountaintop again.

And so hundreds of years later, when Jesus approached the woman at the well, they should have ignored each other. That's one of our assumptions.

The other assumption that has been made about the woman is that she's a prostitute. That's what's assumed because she came to the well at noon, which no respectable woman did. And it's also assumed because she'd had five husbands and was living with a man outside of marriage.

But there's nothing in this story that says she was a prostitute. In fact, it's more likely that she wasn't. It's more likely that her husband either died or abandoned her because she was barren. And that she was now living with someone who refused to marry her, but she needed the security of even the *appearance* of a relationship.

²And the fact that she was an outcast and had to go to the well by herself was because the other women in her village didn't want her bad luck rubbing off on them. Physically, emotionally, and even spiritually, she was in a vulnerable and lonely place.

Taking her immediate situation together with the history of their people, her response to Jesus' request for a drink of water makes sense. But instead of responding in kind, Jesus blows our assumptions out of the water and starts a conversation with her.

³And in this conversation, Jesus doesn't just talk to the woman, he *sees* her. His description of her history isn't condemnation for her sins, but rather recognition that, at best, her life has been difficult. In recognizing and naming her challenges, Jesus values her. He lets her know that she isn't invisible, and that she has worth.

And because she recognized that Jesus was sincere, she felt courageous enough to ask the question that had divided their people for centuries: where is the proper place to worship? And, again, instead of responding in a way that would cause her to shut down, Jesus continued the conversation.

⁴In John's gospel, believing in Jesus means being in relationship with him. It matters that Jesus' revelation to the woman of who he was, and *her* realization of who he can be for her, happened in conversation. Because their conversation shows what true relationship looks like: mutuality, reciprocity, and respect.

⁵Their conversation, their relationship, changed the woman's identity in her community. She went from being shamed to being a witness, from being dismissed to being a disciple, from being alone to being a sheep of Jesus' own fold.

All because Jesus threw society's assumptions out the window and invited her into conversation; and, ultimately, into relationship with him.

As you can imagine, pastors in our area have been talking about worship and community and relationships a lot in the last couple of weeks. In particular, how we go about nurturing community and relationships when we can't worship together - because as a faith community, we're most often together during worship.

2 <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4839>

3 <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/03/lent-3-a-living-water-living-faith/>

4 <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4839>

5 Ibid

And in our conversations, we've had to take a close look at our assumptions about worship and community. And we all agree that being together is important. But protecting each other is more important, and sometimes that means being apart for a bit so that we can better care for the most vulnerable among us.

And in all of this we're being reminded that Jesus is in relationship with us. Whether we're worshiping together or apart, Jesus is in relationship with us. He nourishes us and gives us hope especially in the times we aren't able to be together.

One of the things you'll learn about me is that I talk about the importance of relationships *a lot*. Our relationship with God and with Jesus, and also our relationships with each other. Because our relationship with God and Jesus shapes our relationships with each other.

At the beginning of worship, I asked you who you will miss seeing here in the coming weeks.

As you think of these people, also think about how you will nurture your relationship with them in this time you aren't able to see them regularly. How will you remind them that Jesus is in relationship with them?

The relationship between Jesus and the woman at the well didn't end when he went on his way. It continued through the relationships begun that day in her village.

It's easier to remind each other of Jesus' relationship to us when we meet up and talk with each other face-to-face on a weekly basis. But it's vitally important that we do it when we're apart. Because as that relationship nourishes us, it allows us to nourish others.

In these coming weeks, assume that the people you love need that reminder - that nourishment. Because you need it, too.

Whether we're worshiping together or apart, remember that Jesus is in relationship with us. He nourishes us and gives us hope especially in the times we aren't able to be together. Thanks be to God.