

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

5th Sunday of Lent
Year C

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Text: John 4:5-15

Title: “The Way: Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus—Sinners, Outcasts and the Poor”

Hearing again Jesus’ interaction with the woman at the well, I remembered a story a retired Baptist colleague sent to me. Some of you may have heard it before because I’ve shared it before. It’s about only God being able to love a Baptist. We could change the name Baptist to United Methodist to implicate ourselves and not our Baptist brothers and sisters because what happens in this story is too often true of the whole church.

It’s the story of a man who was walking across a bridge and he saw this guy who looked like he was ready to jump off. So, he thought he would try to stall him until authorities showed up.

“Don’t jump!” I said.

“Why not?” he said. “Nobody loves me.”

“God loves you,” I said. “You believe in God, don’t you?” “Yes, I believe in God,” he said

“Good,” I said. “Are you Christian or Jewish?” “Christian,” he said.

“Me, too!” I said. “Protestant or Catholic?” “Protestant,” he said

“Me, too!” I said. “What kind of Protestant?” “Baptist,” he said.

“Me, too!” I said. “Independent Baptist or Southern Baptist?” “Independent Baptist,” he said.

“Me, too!” I said. “New Evangelical/Moderate Independent Baptist or Conservative Independent Baptist?” “Conservative Independent Baptist,” he said.

“Me, too!” I said. “Calvinistic Conservative Independent Baptist or Lose-Your-Salvation Armenian Conservative Independent Baptist?”

“Calvinistic Conservative Independent Baptist,” he said.

“Me, too!” I said. “Dispensational Premillennial Calvinistic Conservative Independent Baptist or Historical Premillennial Calvinistic Conservative Independent Baptist?”

“Dispensational Premillennial Calvinistic Conservative Independent Baptist,” he said.

“Me, too!” I said. “Unashamed Fundamentalist Against Women in Ministry Dispensational Premillennial Calvinistic Conservative Independent Baptist or Strict Separation of Church and State Against Women in ministry Dispensational Premillennial Conservative Independent Baptist?”

“Unashamed Fundamentalist Against Women in Ministry Dispensational Premillennial Calvinistic Conservative Independent Baptist,” he said.

“Me, too!” I said. “Pro-Disney Boycott Pro-life Unashamed Fundamentalist Against Women in Ministry Dispensational Premillennial Calvinistic Conservative Independent Baptist or Anti-Disney Pro-Choice Unashamed Fundamentalist Against Women in Ministry Dispensational Premillennial Calvinistic Conservative Independent Baptist?”

“Pro-Disney Boycott Pro-life Unashamed Fundamentalist Against Women in Ministry Dispensational Premillennial Calvinistic Conservative Independent Baptist,” he said.

“Me, too!” I said. “KJV Only Pro-Disney Boycott Pro-life Unashamed Fundamentalist Against Women in Ministry Dispensational Premillennial Calvinistic Conservative Independent Baptist, or Modern Versions Pro-Disney Boycott Pro-life Unashamed Fundamentalist Against Women in Ministry Dispensational Premillennial Calvinistic Conservative Independent Baptist?”

“Modern Versions Pro-Disney Boycott Pro-life Unashamed Fundamentalist Against Women in Ministry Dispensational Premillennial Calvinistic Conservative Independent Baptist.” he said.

“Auuugggh!!! You heretic!” I said. And I pushed him over.

We get so tired of politics that sharply divide people, but I’m guessing that you might agree with me that there is no greater divider in the human family than religion. My Baptist friend over and over again would tell me that nobody does conflict and division better than Baptists, but we Methodists are certainly not immune—and let’s not even get started with those Catholics! (Of course, I’m being completely facetious!) What are we to think when people of our own faith are angrily standing with stones in hand ready to launch at other people of faith? How are we to manage ourselves with those who differ from us in belief?

There is no better place to start than to consider Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the

well. I said that this story reminded me of my Baptist colleague's story because this whole story--of which I read only a part--is fraught with behind-the-scenes conflict. For one thing, there were sharp disagreements in belief between Samaritans and Jews. In spite of the fact that they both worshipped the same God and they claimed the same ancestral fathers of faith in Abraham and Moses, there were sharp disagreements that separated the two, not unlike our Baptist friends and our own disagreements in the Methodist family. Jesus knew the reality of division in the faith family when he decided to hike through Samaria on his way north.

They are on their way north, this small group of men, and Jesus is tired. The disciples hike into town to buy some food as he rests beside the well. This is no ordinary well. This is Jacob's well. One of his—and all Jews' and Samaritans'—great ancestors of the faith. As he sits by this well, I imagine a hot, dusty day. The sun is high. Sticky sweat from the day's hiking. Dry throat. He tries to just rest until the disciples return. Maybe he was using this time as a time of solitude, to be alone with God as Jesus was in the habit of doing. Maybe that's why he stayed behind and the disciples went as a group to buy food when it really only required 2 or 3 of them.

In any case, Jesus is alone there at the well from which his ancestors drew water when he sees a woman making her way to the well. People had to walk to fetch water in those days. No turning on the tap. Usually it was the woman's job and usually they would go together in groups at a time when the sun was not high in the sky. So to see a lone woman coming to draw water in the heat of the day was a bit odd.

She comes I imagine with some hesitation. What he is doing there she doesn't know. As she approaches, he tells her, "Give me a drink!" Somehow she knows he is Jewish. Maybe it's an accent? Maybe it's his dress? Whatever it is that's different about Jesus, she knows he is not a local.

Jesus speaking to her is really quite surprising for two reasons. First, because as the Gospel According to John tells readers, "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans." And second, Jewish men did not initiate conversation with an unknown woman and Jewish teachers did not engage in public conversation with a woman. One Jewish source indicates how serious the prohibition was: "Hence the sages have said: He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the law and at the last will inherit *Gehenna*, [which is Greek for *hell*]".

Surely Jesus knew the social conventions. Surely he knew he wasn't supposed to be doing this. He's a Jew. She's a Samaritan. The two groups had been in conflict for centuries. The Jews saw the Samaritans as impure because when the Assyrian empire conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C., they took most of the inhabitants from their lands and replaced them with their own people. The few Jews who remained intermarried with the foreigners and so they were no longer "pure". These were the Samaritans.

Jews and Samaritans also disagreed sharply over worship practices. The Samaritans built a shrine on Mt. Gerizim in Samaria and were convicted about this being the place of true worship, while the Jews of Judea were convicted that Jerusalem was the proper place to worship. In 128 B.C. Jewish troops destroyed the Samaritan sanctuary. Therefore, behind this encounter between the Samaritan and the Jew lies the backdrop of intense conflict. Jesus just should not be having a conversation with a Samaritan.

She notices that he doesn't have a bucket and tells him so and wonders if he is greater than their ancestor Jacob who dug this well, a well that provided life to who knows how many people through the centuries. She wants to know who he is.

He tells her that the water she can reach with her bucket will only quench a person's thirst for so long and they will be back for more, "¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty" he tells her. "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."¹⁵ 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."

She thinks he is talking about liquid but he's talking about something more as he asks about her husband. She confesses she doesn't have one and he confirms it noting that she has had five husbands and the one she is currently living with is not her husband.

It seems that at this point, Jesus should run. Not only is she a Samaritan and a woman but she is a five-time married woman and she is currently living in sin. How in the world can he continue to engage in conversation with a person like this? But he does and he does so without judgment. He doesn't tell her the way she is living is wrong. He doesn't shame her. This is not a "Go-and-sin-no-more" incident which we find later in John's Gospel in chapter 8. Jesus never says that. He is focused on her as a valued child of God.

Because he seems to know her and maybe because he treats her as a valued conversation partner, she calls him a prophet. Since her perception of him is changing. She sees something in him she didn't see at first, she has something to discuss with Jesus as she reminds him that they differ on the place of worship. What about that issue? He tells her:

"Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem."²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.²³ 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.²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

After further conversation with Jesus, this woman leaves her bucket behind and runs back to town as the first female witness in John's Gospel. She is the first one. She tells people as the disciples did earlier, "Come and See! Come and see for yourself. Can he be the Messiah?" Notice she doesn't know for certain. She doesn't have it all worked out but she knows there's something there. She knows he is different. Yet, her lack of uncertainty does not keep others from coming to know Jesus. Because of her witness—incomplete as it may have been, more come to receive the living water of God's Spirit.

I love this story of Jesus' encounter with this woman. Like so many other stories, Jesus crosses lines others won't cross. He values people: sinners, outcasts and the poor that others cut off, judge or ignore. He refuses to allow such divisions to alter who he is. He refuses to allow firmly held beliefs that cause conflict to overpower the more important need to be in relationship with people. He refuses to give in to inherited hatred. He refuses to give power to long-held social conventions to keep him from valuing every person as a deserving child of God. He doesn't care that other people think he shouldn't be talking with an unknown woman in a public place and he doesn't seem to care that his kinsmen also think he should be enforcing his people's prohibition of speaking with an enemy group like the Samaritans. Jesus has more important

things in mind, like the welfare of another human being whom God loves. “Let the divisions and the conflicts die!” he seems to be saying as he engages with this woman, because God has more important matters in mind than our shallow divisions. God is far more interested in providing living water than in nurturing our divisiveness.

In all of this, the waters of baptism symbolize that we are God’s children, one and all. The living water of baptism reminds us that we worship God in Spirit and in truth, that there may be divisions but Jesus’ witness is that all are one on God’s Spirit. Baptism is God’s symbolic act confirming our unity in Jesus.

If you will turn to page 53 in your hymnal, I invite you to reaffirm your baptism with me this morning, remembering that Jesus brings living water for you and for those with whom we may find ourselves in conflict for one reason or another. Let this serve as a reminder for you that you are valued by God as you are with all your doubts, all your certainties, all your sins, and all your faith. You are a valued child of God.

And then when you are invited to come forward and dip your fingers in the font and touch them to your forehead to remember your baptism, imagine Jesus’ words, “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”