

## **Sermon: March 12, 2023 - John 4: 5-42**

### **Ralph Connor Memorial United Church – Rev. Greg Wooley**

Each of us likely has had a time when we have received a warning. Perhaps it was from our parents or our siblings or from our classmates, or it was just something that seemed like common “knowledge.” The warning was some version of “don’t go into that neighbourhood, they’re not like us” or a related warning, “don’t speak to them, they’re disgusting.”

When we hear such warnings as children, we have no idea what’s behind them; most likely, we just take them as truth. I had this experience growing up in south Regina, getting dire warnings from classmates who had never ventured more than ten blocks from home about the dangers of “going down to South Railway.” This warning, I came to learn, was 100% racially motivated, and nearly 100% learned from the bigotry of adults in their lives. But at the time, all I knew was “don’t go there – bad people are there – it’s not a safe place to be”.

Back in Jesus’ day, Jews travelling northeast from Jerusalem or south from Galilee were given the same basic directions that I received in Regina: whatever you do, don’t go through Samaria. This, however, wasn’t just a matter of avoiding a neighbourhood. If you wanted to avoid Samaria - and by extension, the Samaritans – you went ALL the way around.

Holy Land author Peter Walker (pp. 82-85) describes it as follows:

“Galileans, if travelling to Jerusalem, would tend to bypass this whole area on their way southward, going instead down the Jordan Valley and then making their way up to Jerusalem from Jericho. It added about another 40 km to the journey, but it was worth it, if only to avoid the hazards of passing through Samaria.”

“This animosity went back a long way... In 722 BC, many [Israelites] were deported and the area of Samaria was largely repopulated by foreigners. One hundred and fifty years later Judah suffered a parallel fate under the Babylonians; but when the Jewish exiles returned to rebuild Jerusalem, they experienced significant opposition from the Samaritans. To the Jews this may have felt like treachery from supposed cousins. From then on they saw the Samaritans as consisting largely of foreigners and viewed their religion as compromised and impure. Meanwhile the Samaritans themselves claimed to follow a purer form of Judaism, focused exclusively on the first five books of Moses.... It was into this irreconcilable ‘stand-off’ that Jesus came.”

So, how did Jesus handle this? Well, Jesus, on his way back home to Galilee from his first trip to Jerusalem and Judaea, intentionally countered the wisdom of the day. Rather than going all the way around Samaria, on foot, when it was hot and dry - he went right through the middle of Samaritan territory, approached a well to quench his thirst, and had a most marvellous encounter with a local woman. In this encounter we learn that for Jesus, described here as the “giver of living water”, all societal divisions between “us” and “them”, and the dire warnings of what might happen if “we” went into

“their” territory and engaged “them” in conversation, count for nothing. By his words and actions, God in Christ steps past the safety of silos. In the realm of God, everyone belongs, all are invited.

Typically, interpreters of this scripture point out two ways in which Jesus trampled the social conventions of his day. Not only was he talking to a Samaritan, which was basically verboten, he was engaging a woman in theological discourse, the kind of discussion that their patriarchal culture reserved for men only. As if those two broken rules weren’t enough, the discussion between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well also breaks the silence of shame.

Pastor Brian Stoffregen is a Lutheran Pastor and gospel commentator from Yuma Arizona, whose weekly gospel commentaries have been a great help over the years. Shannon and I were privileged to him meet face to face during my sabbatical four years ago. Yuma is a hot and dry place, so Brian knows a bit about water and in his weekly commentary asks this question: why would a local Samaritan woman be going to draw water from a well at mid-day? Drawing fresh water for the household was typically an evening task, so that there would be fresh cool water for the morning; nobody would go at mid-day unless there was a problem. Brian surmises that “the problem” for this particular Samaritan woman was that she was probably being shunned by the locals for her ability to churn through men. We’re not told the circumstances of her life, whether she had been repeatedly widowed, or abruptly left; one way or another, she had become the talk of the town. Best to go get water in the heat of mid-day, when the pointing fingers and wagging tongues were busy with other things.

So not only is Jesus reaching past the societal and religious prohibitions against Jews interacting with Samaritans, not only is he crashing through the even stronger barrier against public conversations between men and women, he may even be breaking through lateral violence that this woman was experiencing in her own community. Jesus engaged this woman in conversation (theological conversation/debate, no less), was willing to drink from the same dipper she used, was unfazed by what others said about her, and hand-picked her to be the one to start spreading the word about God’s living waters.

This is such a perfect scripture for us on this day when we lift up the social justice Christian tradition - the “Ecumenical” tradition, as Janet Gear calls it. Here, both Jesus and this unnamed woman reach beyond religious divisions, seeking a greater common good. Far too often, the lines of supposed safety that we live within in our religious lives make us subservient to the kind of lies that this Samaritan woman and this Jewish man had been fed all their lives: Samaritans are impure/ Jews are uppity and clueless/ Samaritan women are loose/ Jewish men aim to do you harm. And the flip sides of all those were also likely spoken. Even nowadays, disobeying such cultural and gender conventions might just get you isolated, or they might get you killed, and the potential cost to both these people in this scene from the gospel of John should not be underestimated.

The scripture also helps us focus our thoughts as we stop for a moment to ponder what it means for us to be an Affirming Ministry. When we think of ourselves as a faith community – a group of people who respond, each in our own way, to the life and words and ministry and ongoing presence of Jesus Christ – encounters like this one in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of John help ground and encourage us. These words tell of an intercultural encounter that would have been deeply problematic for centuries after the days of Jesus; it's not as if the rift between Samaritans and Jews suddenly vanished just because of what happened at the well at Sychar. These words can and must embolden us in our desire to reach across the traditional chasms that straight, white, middle-class society has told us to fear.

We look at this encounter initiated by Jesus, and it calls us to notice the exclusions that are active and encouraged in this land – in this province – in these towns – and we seek the fortitude to stand against them. We examine the issues we are aware of, where the inclusiveness of this community of faith must improve, and we seek Christ's own wisdom in becoming aware of and addressing the things we simply do not even notice – some subtle, some blatant once they come into our consciousness. And as Jesus and the woman at the well challenged specific prejudices, we acknowledge that worldwide, the queer and trans community are constantly dealing with a specific and virulent set of attitudes, laws and religious prohibitions that make their lives dangerous - simply for loving who they love and being who they are.

In some ways, I see tremendous strides in society in its awareness of exclusion and inclusion. Compared to the days I was growing up, the awareness of racism, sexism, ableism, classism, homophobia and transphobia is so much higher and the willingness to just turn a blind eye is so much less. But awareness of the problem, and actually addressing it both at a societal and a deeply personal level are two very different things. Complacency must not set in, and sometimes it requires that we step into that nasty and not always safe space in the divided world of 2023, where labels and insults get happily lobbed by those holding power, in order to divert attention away from the injustice being addressed.

In all of this, we look again at the ancient account of Jesus seeking water in Samaria, we hear words of engagement and conversation, and we are so thankful that Jesus offers not only as an example for us to emulate, but in so doing he makes a statement of God's own intent. God looks on our divisiveness, our prejudice, our willingness to do things that harm other people, other species, the planet itself, and God frowns; this is not the way it is intended to be. May the good news of Jesus Christ, and the new realm of inclusive, decisive, transformative love that he describes and inaugurates, guide and embolden our journeys. Amen.

References cited:

Gear, Janet. *Undivided Love*. Altona, MB: Friesen, 2022.

Stoffregen, Brian. <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john4x5.htm>

Walker, Peter. *In the Steps of Jesus: An Illustrated Guide to the places of the Holy Land*. Oxford: Lion Hudson Publishing, 2006. (Republished by Zondervan, 2007)

*Each week in Lent, we profile one of the modes of lived faith outlined by Rev Dr Janet Gear in her “Theological Banquet.”*

This morning: “Ecumenical” – a justice-seeking response to God’s call

Perhaps the most curious name of all the place-settings at the Theological Banquet is “Ecumenical”, a term most often used to describe projects where a number of different Churches work together.

Janet Gear (p.148) takes Ecumenical back to its Greek roots – the word Oikoumene, which means “the whole inhabited earth.” To be Ecumenical at this Theological Banquet, is to see what’s going on in the world - social inequity and global suffering (and the crisis facing the planet itself) - and be motivated to do something about it, a faith response that takes the shape of advocacy, resistance, solidarity and compassion. Pluralism, partnership and the common good are concepts regularly expressed by this group as they seek the well-being of the whole inhabited earth.

As described by Janet Gear (pp.145-6), “if there is someone in your congregation providing you with resources on Indigenous rights, climate action, peace in Palestine, the needs of asylum seekers, or the status of food security, it will be an ecumenical.... In the national church offices, they the researchers preparing the briefs about the impact of the government’s latest budget cuts on the vulnerable sectors of society and drafting reports offered at the World Council of Churches’ meeting on gender-based violence. In our Theological schools, they teach decolonizing ministry practices and Christian social ethics. In the pulpit, they are the ones who are told their sermons are too political and that they fail to see ‘both sides.’... They are academics and activists, privileged and disadvantaged, professional and on the edges of the economy, bold and meek, all of them compassionate, courageous, and willing to be scrutinized by Jesus’ version of the kin-dom.”

Janet has already outlined some of the ways that this form of lived faith might show up on a Sunday: it might be in the service, in the sermon or the prayers, but more likely in the announcements and things that happen after the service or out there in shared actions. It may well be something on display outside your Church building, like a rainbow flag or red dresses or orange shirts. And on this Sunday when we lift up what it is to be an Affirming Ministry, and challenge ourselves to be more intentional about that commitment to inclusion in the Church and in our surrounding communities, it is a good thing that we pause for a moment at this place of the banquet table, and give thanks.