

## John 4:5-30, 39-42 – Lent 3 – Living Water – March 12, 2023

+In Nomine Iesu+

I love the conversations in John's Gospel. And here, we get the privilege of listening to Jesus. Now, we might not be very good at listening. A few years ago, I attended an evangelism conference. And the instructor had everyone in the room find a partner and discuss some potentially controversial subjects. I think we started with the definition of marriage and how the government should manage immigration.

Sounds harmless enough, right? But the instructions came with a twist. Only one partner could share his or her opinions. The other could only listen and ask questions. The purpose I suppose, was to help us assess our listening skills. And I think most of us did pretty poorly.

And think about this. How would you do? In fact, try this today. Have a conversation and offer nothing other than careful listening and interested questions. Don't add anything new. Don't tell your own stories or opinion. It is harder than you think. We live in a "telling" culture. We want the world to listen to us. We use speech to get attention for ourselves.

Now, of course, real conversations require a little back and forth. I still appreciate those conversations that have a true give and take. It is nice to get a question rather than a story sometimes. We have all been in those conversations when you don't get to say anything at all. Conversation is a lost art—one we really need to regain. And I think we can learn something from Jesus here. Although His purposes are far broader than making us excellent communicators. So, with that being said, let's listen in.

Last week we heard the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a prominent, important, moral, well-educated Pharisee. Jesus unravels his ideas about eternal life. Jesus cuts right through the man's self-righteousness, revealing that his remarkably good life—by human standards—was nowhere close to pleasing God's expectations of perfection. I imagine the Twelve Disciples enjoyed listening to the conversation as Jesus silenced *the teacher* of Israel.

And so, Jesus informs him that he must be born again, born from above, of water and of the Holy Spirit. He needs regeneration—we all do—a new life that includes death and resurrection. His old life was actually full of sin—even though most wouldn't have said that about him. But Jesus knew the truth. And it's true of all of us. And the answer is found in Jesus—high and lifted up on the Cross to atone for the sins of the world—including the sins of Nicodemus.

This was the message that Jesus gave to Nicodemus. It left his head spinning. He runs out of things to say and can only listen. But this same man who heard the Word of God from Jesus, eventually came to the faith. There is evidence of faith in his life—as he defended Jesus in his conversations with the other Pharisees—as he collected the body of Jesus from the cross. Nicodemus trusted his eternal destiny into the hands of the Eternal Son of God. He became a follower of Jesus Christ.

This was John chapter three, and now we move on to John chapter four and we meet someone new. You heard our reading. This woman doesn't have much in common with

Nicodemus. Instead of the polished, wealthy, well-educated, religious Jew, Jesus now encounters a Samaritan.

Now, when we hear the word *Samaritan* we often think of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. We see the big red kettle in the endzone of the Cowboys stadium. And in that parable, Jesus makes the Samaritan the hero of the story. It's the socking detail of Jesus' story.

When a Jewish person thought about a Samaritan, they thought of someone who had been unfaithful religiously and politically. A Samaritan was an outcast—and for good reason—false in doctrine—false in lifestyle. Jews didn't like Samaritans. And for the matter, Samaritans didn't like Jews.

But this Samaritan woman's experience of rejection was not limited to the Jews. Based on the time she was at the well—going out in the heat of the day—she was also not accepted by her own people. Her lifestyle—which will come out in the conversation—leaves her isolated from her own community. She goes at this time so that she won't have to talk with anyone.

But, to her surprise, she isn't alone when she gets to the well. Jesus is there. And that will make all the difference. And contrary to all appropriate social practices, Jesus talks to her. And He even asks something of her. He asks her for a drink of water. And this leads to an interesting question from her. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?"

She asked, and Jesus answered, with a surprising twist, "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." It is an interesting response. And she seems to be really taking it in.

Jesus then goes on to talk about the water that He will give. Those who drink it will never be thirsty again—literally—as our ESV translates it—never be thirsty forever. This water will be a spring of eternal life. The picture of He painted was of water so alive, so dynamic, so energetic, it would begin to roll like an ever-flowing stream.

Here, Jesus picks up the language of Psalm 36, as the Psalmist praises God, "For with you is the fountain of life." The Prophet Jeremiah says something similar, confessing that God is "The fountain of living waters." Of course, just like Nicodemus, she doesn't quite get it. In both instances, Jesus says hard things. We have the ability to take it all in slowly. For her, this is happening so quickly. And she wonders what all this means.

But now, the conversation radically shifts. Jesus says to her, "Go get your husband and bring him here." And here we find out why she was at the well alone in the heat of the day. She had been rejected—even by the Samaritans—for Jesus prophetically reveals that she's had five different husbands. And now was with a man who was not her husband. Her sexual immorality had left her cut off from her people. Sin does that.

But she doesn't get offended. Jesus is right. And now she listens carefully. Clearly, this Man is a Prophet. And He hasn't begged out of the conversation. There was every reason for Him to leave. It wasn't culturally appropriate for Jesus even to be talking to her. Although Jesus didn't care about such things. He came to seek and save the lost. She was a

Samaritan, she was alone, she was caught in her adultery. And yet, Jesus keeps speaking to her.

Even so, she does what many of us do in an uncomfortable conversation. She changes the subject.

But she also realizes this is no ordinary conversation. And so, she asks one of the most important theological questions of the day. “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

Now she may have had a real interest in the question. There certainly was a divide over such things between Jews and Samaritans. They each had their own place of worship. But really, the debate went back more than 800 years. Was the Temple the only legitimate place of worship?

Now, here, I think she also hoped that this Jewish Prophet would take the bait and forget His awkward question about her personal life. And surprisingly Jesus goes with it. He lets her take the lead—sort of. Jesus replies, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.”

Then, he goes on to say, “those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” Here Jesus transcends their debate about the Samaritan worship site and the Jewish worship site. Even though the Samaritans were the ones rebelling against the order that God had put in place, both sites would be destroyed a few years later, anyway.

Now, it may appear that this conversation is all over the place to us. Jews and Samaritans. Living water. Unfaithfulness in marriage. Worship. It seems that Jesus just lets this unnamed Samaritan woman guide the conversation all over the place. But let me suggest that actually is guiding the whole thing. And, that this conversation is intimately tied to the conversation with Nicodemus.

Last week we ended with Jesus saying these words, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” And so, these two conversations give us two examples about those who will be saved. Jesus brings people into his kingdom, giving them the forgiveness of sins through His cross, to people we might not expect.

He brings His saving words to a guy like Nicodemus. Religious, intelligent, wealthy. But then He also brings His saving words to our Samaritan woman. Outcast, unwanted, immoral. Jesus brings His salvation to people that He chooses. That He elects. Salvation depends on His saving words, not on our worthiness. And we can see Him working in these stories. Calling people to Himself. They need but listen. Faith comes by hearing.

And so to worship in Spirit and truth needs to be understood in this context. True worship existed in the Old Testament in the Temple in Jerusalem. This is where He caused His name to dwell. And this where God promised to be. With its incense, and psalmody, and sacrificial system, its table fellowship, and feasts. But now, true worship will be tied to a new Temple—it is all connected to Jesus Himself.

Remember that last week, Jesus talked a lot about the work of the Spirit, as the Spirit gives new life from above. But the work of the Spirit is always tied to the Word of God. This is where He works—when and where He wills. And the Word of God is Jesus.

So, Jesus is the new Temple. To worship in Spirit and truth doesn't mean to give up form and liturgy. It doesn't mean we have to be more fashionable, cool, or authentic. It means that all true worship of God the Father must come through Jesus—the Word of God Himself.

He is the place where Heaven meets earth. Jesus says, a bit later in John's Gospel "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through me." True worship then is worship through Jesus. That is Spirit and that is truth. There are no other ways. And Jesus leads the Samaritan woman at the well right there—to Himself. And He does the same for us.

So, like last week, our Gospel reading is a conversation. Jesus speaks. Both listeners begin the conversation lost, wandering, and leading lives of rebellion and sin. Even though they could not be more different. But by the end of the conversation, Jesus has made them new with His words. It doesn't matter if they are rich or poor, popular or outcast, Jewish, Samaritan, or even people like us Gentiles. Every person comes to Jesus with the same need for eternal life, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins.

It is interesting. The woman said to Jesus, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called the Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." She is not wrong. And Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he." Really, this is one of His "I Am" statements.

And this is worth hearing. Jesus says things like "I am the bread of life." "I am the light of the world." "I am the resurrection and the life." And with each claim He builds a connection to the Old Testament name, Yahweh. Here, He literally says, "I Am. The one speaking to you."

Here, Jesus reveals that He is the Christ, the Messiah, the great "I Am" coming into the world. And this is where the conversation ends. It makes all the difference in the life of this woman. She instantly goes and talks about Jesus with everyone who would listen—everyone she was trying to avoid before. I hope something like that happens with us as well. He has surely given us something to take in today. And as Jesus says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*