

John 4:5-42: **Belonging**

C. Nolan Huizenga, Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville, TN

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Our gospel reading contains more verses than we usually hear in worship. So the good news for you is that today you get more Jesus, less preacher.

And because it's longish, I've asked [Rhonda](#) to read with me to help us grasp the conversational nature of this passage.

So settle in, let your ears fall open, and listen with us for God's word from the Gospel of John, chapter 4 (NRSV):

Now Jesus left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through *Samaria*.

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, 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. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her,  
'[Give me a drink?](#)'  
(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him,  
'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?'  
(Jews do *not* share things in common with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, '[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.'](#)

The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that "living water"? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?'

Jesus said to her, '[Everyone who drinks of \*this\* water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will \*never\* be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal \*life!\*](#)'

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.'

Jesus said to her, '[Go, call your husband, and come back.'](#)

The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.'

Jesus said to her, '[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!](#)'

The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet! Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.'

Jesus said to her, '[Woman, believe me: the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.](#)

You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

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.

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.'

The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.'

Jesus said to her, 'I...am... the one who is speaking to you.'

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?'

Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.'

But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.'

So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?'

Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.

Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.

For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.'

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.

And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.'

The word of God for the people of God.

**Thanks be to God.**

The author of John doesn't keep things short and sweet. He makes them big and savory. John's gospel doesn't offer compact parables that say "The kingdom of God is like...." John instead draws out rich narratives, and dialogue creating bigger scenes like today's story.<sup>1</sup>

A long, winding dialogue like this matters because real belief in Jesus Christ, an understanding of his mission, depends on deep conversation. Jesus doesn't hand the Samaritan woman a tract and walk away. He goes on a journey with her, follows her line of questioning, and also pushes her to look more deeply at her own life and at who he is. Long relationship and conversation nurture faith. Jesus demonstrates here that God values people as real dialogue partners.

So John's gospel shows us that **we need time for relationship**. We need time to know Jesus and to know each other. This is what coming to faith looks like.

A pastor friend says that "a Jew initiating contact with an unknown woman, let alone a Samaritan one, is a turducken of a scandal."<sup>2</sup> You know: one thing inside another thing inside another. "Jews and Samaritans did not have any contact, whatsoever, at all, especially physical contact, period. And here's Jesus, asking for a cup of water."<sup>3</sup>

So what even brings them together? Our reading started out with "Jesus had to go through Samaria" when traveling from Judea to Galilee. But like most Jews did, he could have taken a different route avoiding the Samaritan region.

Samaritans originated as northern Israelites who were *not* the ones deported by the Assyrian Empire in 722 BCE. These folks stayed behind and over time intermarried with Assyrian and later Babylonian captors. When the exiled Israelites and Judeans were eventually allowed to return home, "they wanted nothing to do with the Samaritans" whom they deemed unclean ethnically and religiously. So "while there were many commonalities between the two, by the time of Jesus, the conflict was solidified by the construction of two separate temples for the worship of Yahweh: the Jews rebuilt their temple in Jerusalem...but the Samaritans built their temple on Mount Gerizim."<sup>4</sup>

Remember last week when Jesus told Nicodemus that God so loved the world, the cosmos? God truly does love the whole entire world, all of creation, and so in [this] very next chapter, Jesus takes his disciples through Samaria to show them what the world looks like and who the world is. The world, in this case, is the last person on the planet you would think God could love — a woman, a foreigner, a Samaritan...<sup>5</sup>

So maybe the theological necessity of this trip was to find this woman who becomes a witness to her whole community. "She doesn't even go looking for Jesus; Jesus goes looking for her."<sup>6</sup> I love that because John's gospel shows that **we need to be found**.

And whereas Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, the Samaritan woman Jesus finds talks with him in the brightest daylight. In the heat of the day, it turns out they both need water. And when Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Nicely observed by my colleague the Rev. Cliff Haddox, who wrote a helpful lectionary study paper on this text in 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Again, Cliff Haddox.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, Karoline M. *Belonging*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2023. Kindle Edition, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Quotes (slightly edited) from Lewis, Karoline M. *Belonging*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2023. Kindle Edition, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. xi, 26.

elevates the conversation to a spiritual level, “She steps into the light, willing and open to imagine what a life with Jesus might look like.”

Scholars throughout church history have offered their perspectives on this story, all too often presuming that the Samaritan woman deserves judgment. This week I felt especially grateful for the work of Karoline Lewis who teaches preaching at Luther Seminary in Minnesota. She recently published a beautiful book called *Belonging*.<sup>7</sup> It gets to the heart of Christian discipleship, and the whole book is an exploration of this very conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. There’s so much more richness than we can cover this morning. What if a bunch of us read *Belonging* together in a class or a book club?

Last fall I preached on a story from Luke 20 where some Sadducees bring Jesus a theological trick question:

Moses wrote...that if a man’s brother dies leaving a widow but no children, the brother must marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first man married a woman and then died childless. The second and then the third brother married her. Eventually all seven married her, and they all died without leaving any children.... In the resurrection, whose wife will she be?

Here we are in a different gospel, Jesus taking part in a different conversation. He asks this Samaritan woman to go get her husband. She reveals that that she has no husband. Jesus says, right, you’ve had five husbands. Could it be that she lived through a situation like the Sadducees made up? Imagine successive husbands — brothers — each leaving her bereft and childless, and the law obligating the next brother in line to marry his sister-in-law and try to have a child.

We never do learn the story behind *this* woman’s marital status. But it’s probably a tender subject, and Jesus does not shame her or grill her or call her sinful. Instead, Jesus and the woman mutually tell each other the deepest truth of their lives. She tells him “I have no husband” and Jesus tell her his identity: “I Am.”

In the course of this balanced, mutual conversation, note how the woman gradually recognizes Jesus. A relationship evolves. She goes from seeing Jesus as maybe a thirsty Jew with no manners, to recognizing that he has something she needs (water), to saying “you are a prophet,” to saying, “Could this be the Messiah?” to Jesus telling her, “I Am.”<sup>8</sup> It’s the first time Jesus says “I Am” in this gospel. And of course “I Am Who I Am” is God’s own name as revealed to Moses.

Much later in John’s gospel, Mary Magdalene will become the first person to proclaim Jesus resurrected. This Samaritan woman becomes an equally superb evangelist. She runs back to her town, leaving behind her water jar because her mission for that day has changed. She tells everyone about meeting Jesus. “Many Samaritans of that city believed in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony.”

John’s gospel shows us that we **need the voices of women**. This church has for decades welcomed the strong voices of women proclaiming the gospel, and we continue to need people of all genders as our preachers and liturgists and musicians and teachers.

Finally for now, what Jesus offers in this conversation is living water, flowing water, an unending source of the water of life. This living water he promises is life abundant, the presence and Spirit of

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.abingdonpress.com/product/9781791025830/>

<sup>8</sup> Karoline Lewis on this week’s Sermon Brainwave podcast: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/892-third-sunday-in-lent-year-a-march-12-2023>

God. It's unending relationship with Jesus and therefore with God. Friends, this living water is the stuff of salvation. On this Third Sunday in Lent John's gospel shows us that long before Jesus gets to the cross and the resurrection, he is already offering life eternal in this conversation with a supposed enemy.

Joy Moore, also a professor of preaching at Luther Seminary, remembers that when she was growing up in the 1960s, there were certain freeway exits that her Black family just didn't take. She says that some of those places, some of those cities, she now feels able to enter because of the power of the gospel, because of God's spirit welling up and making transformation possible.<sup>9</sup> How do we heal the divisions between communities? It takes attentive, respectful conversations sustained by living water.

Part of the good news revealed in today's story is that in Jesus reconciliation is possible between Jews and Samaritans. Jesus' disciples register astonishment about that. Reconciliation is possible between black and white Americans. Between genders with unequal amounts of social power. Reconciliation is possible between subcommunities of this church who don't always know how to relate to each other.

The gospel of John shows us all that **we need to belong**. We need to belong to Jesus, to belong to his community, to abide with him over time like the woman at the well.

In the name of God the Wellspring,  
the Living Water,  
and the Baptizing Spirit.

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<sup>9</sup> Sermon Brainwave podcast: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/892-third-sunday-in-lent-year-a-march-12-2023>