

**PEOPLE OF THE BIBLE --
THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AT THE WELL**

(07/28/2024)

Scripture Lesson: John 4:1-42

“God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” (Jn. 4:24)

Let me begin with a question. How many of you have had a religious experience? Put your hands up.

Aha, it is just as I thought! Let me ask you another question: How many of you are confused about what a religious experience is? In other words, you are not sure what counts as a religious experience? Please put your hand up. Aha, it is just as I thought!

The scripture lesson that we read this morning, Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, is rich with meaning. One small but significant part of it has to do with the matter of religious experience. It is my hope that exploring Jesus’ encounter with the woman may help dispel the thick cloud of confusion that surrounds this important topic and that prevents us from realizing that we all have religious experiences, experiences of God’s presence in our life.

I find that there is a great deal of confusion about what “counts” as a religious experience. This is partially because many of the religious experiences that are recorded in the Bible are what I would call “big” religious experiences. They are so powerful and so dramatic that, if we take them as communicating the essence of religious experience, most of us would have to sadly admit that we have not had any. People in biblical times may have had them, but not us.

An example of this kind of religious experience is Saul’s conversion experience on the Road to Damascus. Saul sees a blinding light and hears Jesus say to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” This experience turns Saul’s life around! He goes from being a zealous persecutor of Jesus’ followers to becoming the greatest missionary and theologian in the history of the Christian church. Some religious experiences are indeed like that, experiences that turn one’s life around one hundred eighty degrees. Some are like that, *but not all*.

On the less dramatic side, we could note the experience of the two apostles on the Road to Emmaus following Jesus’ death and resurrection. The two apostles walk with Jesus and talk with him, but they do not know him. They do not know him because Jesus is not as they *knew* him, not in his familiar earthly form. It is not until Jesus breaks bread with them that their eyes are opened, and they recognize him. Then he vanishes from their midst. This, too, was an epiphany, a transient but powerful religious experience.

This morning, I would like us to consider the account in the Gospel of John of Jesus and an unnamed Samaritan woman from the perspective of religious experience.

The introductory verses of the scripture lesson explain the reason for Jesus' journey from Judea to Galilee and for his contact with the people of Samaria. The Pharisees in Judea are jealous of Jesus' popularity, a popularity that exceeds even that of John the Baptist, whom they also regard as a threat. Jesus is aware of the storm of controversy that is beginning to arise around him, around his teachings and healings which the Pharisees find threatening. Perhaps he feels that to become embroiled in an open conflict with the religious leaders at this time would draw attention away from his mission and his message. So, he travels north toward Galilee.

There is a lesson for us here. Sometimes it is necessary to face into a controversy and do battle with the opposition. At other times it is more prudent to avoid or deflect it. The wise person knows when to take a stand and when to yield. As the writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us, there is "a time to every purpose; . . . a time to keep silence, and a time to speak."

The most direct route from Judea to Galilee is through the region of Samaria. The Samaritans had been at odds with the Jews since the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. The Samaritan religion, like the Hebrew religion, is based upon the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, the books of Moses. However, the center of the Samaritan religious institution was the temple on Mount Gerizim. In the Hebrew version of Deuteronomy 27:4, after they crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land, God tells the Israelites to build a stone altar on Mount Ebal. The Samaritan Pentateuch substitutes Mount Gerizim for Mount Ebal in this passage, thus placing the sacred space within the bounds of their territory.

Jesus, a Jew, is passing through this difficult and dangerous region. It is the sixth hour, about noon. It is hot. Jesus, "wearied as he was with his journey," sits down beside the well to rest while his disciples go ahead to Shechem to buy provisions for their journey.

Jesus is fast becoming the hope of his people. Many people see him as the Messiah. This understanding may have shaped the expectations of at least two of his disciples: Simon the Zealot and Judas. Many of Jesus' followers throughout history have found themselves drawn to the image of a victorious, conquering Christ. But there was another side to Jesus: a human, vulnerable side.

Many of us here this morning are carrying heavy burdens. Many of us are tired from shouldering the burdens which we choose to carry, those which we need to carry, or those which we believe we are called to carry in our daily life.

Jesus, too, was tired. Remember, Jesus was human as well as divine. I find it comforting to remember that Jesus was human. He knew physical pain. He knew the hurt of rejection and betrayal. There were times when he was discouraged and disillusioned. This passage reminds us that Jesus was human, that he could be hungry and thirsty, that he could be hot and tired.

In his correspondence with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Carlyle protested that Emerson, shut up in a quiet nook of a life into which no breath of the tidings of the world's unhappiness was allowed to blow lest it might upset him, seemed to Carlyle like a complacent

person, standing on the shore out of reach of the waves and throwing cheerful advice to a swimmer who was battling for his life in angry waters. Wow! Carlyle's eloquent depiction of Emerson may or may not be true, but at least we know that Jesus does not stand on the safe and solid shore offering advice to those sinking beneath the billows. Jesus knows our struggles because he had his own struggles! In the words of a current television ad, "Jesus gets us!"

As Jesus sits by the edge of the well, unable to drink from it because he has no bucket to lower into it, a Samaritan woman approaches. It is unusual that a woman would draw water from the well in the middle of the day rather than in the cool of the evening, when all the women of the village would gather around the well and share the news of the day. It is also strange that she should come to Jacob's well, which was over a hundred feet deep, when there were other wells that she must have passed on the way from Sychar.

As Jesus notes, the woman is leading a less than moral life. Perhaps her unsavory reputation has made her unpopular with the other women in the town. She may have made a point of coming to the well when she could be reasonably certain that no one would be there. But someone *is* there, someone who asks her for a drink!

Let me ask you another question. Which is more important: what Jesus gives to us, or what Jesus asks of us? That's a rhetorical question; you don't have to yell out your answer. Of course, it is possible that both are important, and both are inextricably intertwined!

In our prayers we ask God to help us: to give us comfort and strength, to guide and to heal. We seek to draw from the depth of the resources of God, from the living water of Jesus to help us with the living of our life. But this is not the whole story. We need God, but God also needs us! God invites us to be co-creators in the shaping of our own lives and then, through us, in the shaping of the world, in the evolution of life on this little planet. In our prayer and worship, of course we need to bring our requests before God. But we also need to understand what God asks of us.

Is there a way that, in our daily life, we can hold a cup of water to Jesus' parched lips?

The Buddha, shocked one day at coming upon an emotionally disturbed follower of his who had been suffering from dysentery, cleaned up the mess with his own hands and lovingly waited on the man. The next day, with a grieved heart, he told his disciples how they had failed to be true to their call, adding, "Always remember that what you do for helpless folk I take as kindness done to me." Does this sound familiar?

There is another story about the Buddha. In his travels, the Buddha came across a tigress who, along with her three cubs were starving. The Buddha lay down before them and offered his body as food for this starving mother tiger and her cubs. He laid down his life for them. Does this sound familiar? We need to remember that, as Jesus' disciples, we are God's presence; we are God's hands in the world.

It is also noteworthy that, in a time of personal need, Jesus does not perform a miracle. Two chapters later in John we read that Jesus feeds five thousand people. However, Jesus refuses to use his power for his own or his disciples' comfort. If they are hungry, they have to beg or buy food. Jesus makes no use of his special powers to meet his own needs. He can't even get a cup of water unless someone helps him.

Perhaps we should remember this when we ask Jesus or God to do for us what we really could and should be doing for ourselves. Too often our prayer is little more than wishing for a better life, a life without struggle or pain, when the struggle or pain is caused or at least exacerbated by our own doing or our resistance to change. Our prayer is misguided when we ask God to do for us what we could and should be doing for ourselves.

Jesus asks the woman for a drink. The woman is taken aback! She questions why a Jew would ask a favor of a Samaritan for, as she notes, Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus tells her, somewhat cryptically, that if she knew to whom she was speaking, she would ask *him* for a drink, and he would give her *living* water. The woman then asks the million-dollar question: "*Where do I get this living water?*"

All of us here this morning are in on the secret! We get this living water from Jesus! When we place ourselves in the presence of Jesus, when we talk with him, when we become his disciple, we open ourselves to receive the living water. The living water is the peace that passes all understanding, a joy deeper than any other joy. It is a power that can strengthen us for the burdens that we carry in our daily life. If we have Jesus in our heart, he becomes in us a fountain, a spring of water welling up to eternal life!

The woman then asks Jesus about what we call sacred space, where we might go to encounter God or be encountered by God. The burning debate between the Jews and Samaritans of Jesus' day was about the divinely appointed site for the central worship and sacrifice of the religion of Yahweh. Is it on Mount Gerizim? Or is it in the temple at Jerusalem?

Jesus tells the woman that God is Spirit, and that we must worship God in spirit and in truth. Even though the passage contains elements of Jewish sectarianism, e.g., Jesus declaring that salvation comes from the Jews, the central thrust of the passage calls us to experience God as spirit, not as sacred space that someone owns. BTW, I wish the Israelis and the Palestinians, the Jews and the Muslims would understand this instead of fighting to the death over control of what they consider sacred space. Jesus calls us to a deeper understanding of God, an understanding that breaks apart our petty religious categories, like the categories of sacred and secular, especially in relation to geography.

Finally, we have in this passage an example of the distinction between what the psychologist William James calls first-hand religion and second-hand religion. If our religion is a second-hand religion, we believe because of the experiences of others, e.g., those in our religious tradition whose experiences are recorded in our Bible. If we have what James calls a first-hand religion, we believe because we have experienced for ourselves.

In the 1960 BBC interview with Carl Jung, John Freeman asked Jung if he believed in God. Jung smiled and said, “I don’t believe; *I know*.” This is first-hand religion! In her encounter with Jesus, the woman at the well moves from second-hand religion, believing what has been handed down to her by her religious tradition, to first-hand religion, to believing because of her personal encounter, her relationship with the Lord!

This matter of the distinction between first-hand and second-hand religion also appears later in the chapter. The woman goes back to her village and tells her people that she has met a man who knows her in her depths, who knows everything she has ever done. Perhaps he is the Messiah! The people of the village ask Jesus to stay with them, and he does; he remains with the people of this little Samaritan village for two days. Scripture tells us (vs. 41-42),

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 people of the village, like the woman, move from second-hand to first-hand religion on the basis of their religious experience, their personal conversations with the Lord.

To return to our initial question, what is the contribution of this scripture lesson for our understanding of religious experience?

First, we need to remember that we find Jesus not only in what we receive, but also in what we give. As the Buddha reminds us, we can find the spirit of Christ in “the least of these.” As the Buddha reminds us, we can find the spirit of Christ in what we give to others. When we respond to Jesus’ call to reach out to those in need, our outreach becomes a religious experience.

Second, as we noted a few weeks ago in our reflections on Enoch, just as the woman was talking with Jesus but did not know it; just as the two disciples who walked with the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus talked with Jesus but did not know it; so also, we can talk to Jesus but not know it. If the risen Christ is with us and within us always, are we not talking to him all day long? When I think of this, I wonder what I have just been saying to him in my thoughts. We need to remember that, just as with the woman at the well, Jesus knows us in our depths. He knows everything about us! At times, that’s just a little scary!

Finally, like the woman at the well, we need to be open to an encounter with Jesus at totally unexpected places. The woman encounters Jesus in her daily rounds. He meets her where she is. He calls her to turn her life around. He receives a drink of water from her, but he gives her the living water, the water that transforms her life!

The Samaritan woman at the well would tell us, in our daily life, to look around. She would tell us to listen carefully, because Jesus might be closer to us than we think. She would tell us that what is important is not only what we receive from Jesus, but also what we give back to him.

She would challenge us to hold a cup of cool, refreshing water to Jesus' parched lips.

A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

The First Community Church of Southborough

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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.