**March 12, 2023 John 4:1-26**

***Acting With Compassion***

**Scripture:** John 4:1-26 NRSV

*(1)Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John" (2)--although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized-- (3)he left Judea and started back to Galilee. (4)But he had to go through Samaria. (5)So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. (6)Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. (7)A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (8)(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) (9)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.) (10)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." (11)The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? (12)Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" (13)Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, (14)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." (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." (16)Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." (17)The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; (18)for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" (19)The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. (20)Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." (21)Jesus said to 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." (25)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." (26)Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."*

**Notes:**

1. Jesus has a ***Life***-***transforming*** Conversation.
   1. The conversation between Jesus and the woman is ***strange***.
   2. A conversation about ***living*** ***water*** takes place.
   3. She’s ***confused*** because she sees no evidence of “living water.”
2. Jesus then tells the woman about her ***life***.
   1. Jesus does not seem to be ***judging*** her.
   2. God ***sees*** her and ***cares*** about her.
3. Jesus then reveals to her that he is the ***Messiah***.
   1. She ***returns*** to town and tells others.
   2. The outcast woman then becomes the catalyst for ***revival***.
4. The fields were ***Ripe*** for the Harvest.
   1. The most transformative thing is the presence of ***Jesus***.
   2. Jesus demonstrates ***inclusivity*** with the Samaritans.
   3. Being seen and known by Jesus is truly ***transforming***.
5. Love and compassion are ***transformative***.
   1. This harvest for the kingdom of God is ***humble*** and ***gracious***.
   2. He lifts up the ***outcast***, the ***ridiculed***, the ***oppressed***.
6. We’re often surprised by the Holy Spirit, and where ***harvest*** happens.
   1. God wants to work outside of our human-made ***boundaries***.
   2. To have harvest conversations, we must be ***willing***.
7. ***Division*** has been a reality in the world throughout history.
   1. Our example is ***Jesus***.
   2. He broke ***boundaries*** over and over again.
   3. He ***demonstrated*** the kind of people we are supposed to be.

**Script:**

Have you ever noticed the human characteristic of developing a pecking order. Many of us establish a list of who we are and who we will associate with. In elementary school, the boys were expected to act one way and the girls another. We established that boys were different than girls and should be treated as such. Now I am not saying that what I was taught was wrong or right, but what I was taught determined how I would treat others in the future. There would be times when I would befriend somebody from a different culture, or another ethnicity or of different sexual orientation; and those around me would caution me about befriending them. I knew who or what they were before becoming their friend. But I saw the person, not the agenda they may have been affiliated with who they are.

We all have biases, people we talk to and people we avoid talking to. There are groups of people we look up to and strive to be like. And, we have groups of people we look down on, because of who they were born to be or because of who they chose to be.

In *Water for the Way,* Gabriel Benjiman paints a picture of South Africa during apartheid. Some of you may remember that period of history. It was a terrible time in South Africa; non-white citizens were discriminated against, They couldn’t even travel to certain places without permits, They were subject to strict segregation laws. This imagery is used to connect us with the story of Jesus and the woman at the well. Two enemy groups the Jews and the Samaritans are often viewed on equal footing both are subjects in the Roman Empire, but the reality is that the Jews hold more social power than the Samaritans, and they look on the Samaritans with disdain.

In the conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well, Jesus is the one with the power and privilege. His asking her for water can easily be seen as a power move on his part, but then things change. The conversation transforms. Jesus doesn’t elevate himself; he doesn’t lord power over her. Instead, he humbles himself in conversation with her, and her life is transformed, the lives of those observing and hearing about the interaction are forever changed as well. Stand with me as we share in the reading of our passage today from John 4:1-42

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This is an Extraordinary Circumstance. Jews traveling from Judea to Galilee would avoid the most straightforward path there. The shortest path would travel through Samaria. But the Jewish people chose to take a longer route so they could avoid going through Samaria. Bible interpreters have disagreed on whether the text emphasizing that Jesus “*had* to go through Samaria” has a geographical meaning or a theological one. It seems, however, that Jesus has chosen this route for a purpose beyond simply shortening his travel time.

Jacob’s well is an important reference. The mention of the well brings to listeners’ minds the betrothal stories of the patriarchs: Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, who all met their wives at wells. There were multiple religious laws about men interacting with women in Jewish culture. One of them was that they never spoke alone to women they were not related to. If the first cultural and religious norm Jesus breaks is going through instead of around Samaria, then this is the second. Nobody else is around when he speaks to the woman at the well. We can see the enormity of Jesus’s decision to cross boundaries when the disciples return. They are surprised to see Jesus talking to her. John makes a point to say none of them asked the questions they must have all been thinking: “What do you want?” (to the woman) and “Why are you talking with her?” (to Jesus).

Jesus has a Life-transforming Conversation. Jesus has numerous surprising, one-on-one conversations in the Gospel of John, including with Nicodemus, a male member of the religious elite, and Mary Magdalene in the resurrection narrative, among others. Jesus has a habit of changing people’s very lives in one-on-one conversations. The conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well is strange not only because it happens at all but also because of what is said. When he asks her for water, listeners of the story might be reminded of Old Testament stories of requests for hospitality, which casts Jesus as a prophet. If listeners are also reminded of the well-related betrothals of other faith ancestors, then this story could also be pointing to the reality of end times and the great banquet yet to come.

The woman points out to Jesus that he is a Jew, which could be the most surprising action of the exchange. It is bold of her—the one with less social power—to point out Jesus’s impropriety, but she could be doing it out of fear. After all, she is alone at a well with a strange man who belongs to a community that has been unkind to people like her. We can also assume she is an outcast in her village because the well is a place to socialize, but she has come at a time when no one else (or few others) would be there.

A conversation about living water takes place. “Living water” could mean freshly flowing water, a rare and precious commodity in that arid environment. She is confused because she sees no evidence of this “living water” he offers, he makes his claim again. To be honest, Jesus sounds a little like a traveling salesman here, enticing this woman with claims and descriptions of a special kind of water only he has that will quench thirst forever and even lead to eternal life! The woman is sold! She endures the daily burden of not only collecting water but also doing it by herself, as an outcast. So yes, absolutely! “Sir, give me this water!”

Jesus then tells the woman about her life. It’s important for us to understand some cultural details about this story. We cannot read about her multiple husbands and current unmarried relationship with a sixth man from our twenty-first-century lens. Women in this culture did not have the power to choose or initiate divorce. It’s possible she’s been widowed five times. forced to marry her dead husband's brother. Even if it is multiple divorces, we must remember that men have all the power in that context.

While this story has often been interpreted as one that reveals the woman’s sin, Jesus does not seem to be judging her. Revealing to her that he knows her story, which demonstrates to her that God sees her and cares about her, which may remind of us another outcast woman, an outcast that God saw and cared for by providing “living water”: her name was Hagar and it is found in Genesis 13.

Jesus then reveals to her that he is the Messiah. She sees that he is the one they have been waiting for and she returns to town and tells others. Everyone who hears of Jesus is astounded, and they urge him to stay in their village for a while. The outcast woman then becomes the catalyst (for revival) (Revival) for the belief of many Samaritans from her community.

The fields ~~were~~ ***ARE*** Ripe for the Harvest. People’s lives are transformed by the message of living water, but the most transformative thing in this story is the presence of Jesus, he breaks religious and geographical boundaries to demonstrate inclusivity toward someone who represents the cultural exclusions of women it makes no difference whether it is Jewish or otherwise it also demonstrates inclusivity with the Samaritans; both women and men. Being seen and known by Jesus is what truly transforms the life of the woman at the well. Being seen and known without judgment is what drives her to tell others. Love and compassion are transformative.

This harvest for the kingdom of God that springs up in Samaria is unexpected to Jesus’s disciples. Jesus is the expected Messiah, but he is not the Messiah they expected. His way is humble and gracious. He lifts up the overlooked, the outcast, the ridiculed, the oppressed. Jesus is rejecting the idea and teaching his followers to reject it as well. Jesus is not teaching that the kingdom of God is only for certain people. He is teaching that the Kingdom of God is for all. Like the disciples, we are sometimes surprised by the movement of the Holy Spirit, and by where the harvest is happening.

God often wants to work outside of our human-made boundaries, especially when those boundaries are discriminatory, oppressive, and ostracizing. Jesus willfully humbled himself, when he had the power to do so. His behavior communicates to us, his followers, that to have harvest conversations, we have to be willing to be humble, willing to lay down what we might view as our rights, willing to set aside our privileges, and to truly see people not with judgment but as the beloved creations of God that they are.

Division has been a reality in the world throughout history. Not just in the Bible, not just in “other countries,” and not just in the past. Humans everywhere have created systems of oppression and boundaries that make outcasts of innocent victims. We even argue about trivial matters. We find it difficult to cross certain boundaries. We find it difficult to associate with certain people. We act as if we are afraid we will be ridiculed. We act as if we are afraid our reputations may be tarnished.

Yet our example is Jesus. He broke boundaries over and over again to illustrate just how vast the love of God is. He humbled himself in extraordinary ways in order to bring justice and love to those around him. He demonstrated the kind of people we are supposed to be as well: people who lay down our privilege, who take the time to see and know people, who don’t pass judgment but act with compassion, who cross human-made boundaries to share the love of God with others.

This is the season of Lent, and so like Christ, may we be humble. May we confess and repent of when we have allowed human boundaries to divide us and avoided God’s ripe harvest so we can truly see and hear those around us, that they might know they are also the beloved of God.