

John 4:5-15, 19-26, 39-42

So Jesus 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."

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 he, the one who is speaking to you."

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."

Three Strikes and You're In - August 25, 2019

John 4:5-15, 19-26, 39-42

One of the mysteries of the gospels is how Jesus portrayed himself to his followers, to those who heard his message, and to those in authority. For the most part, Jesus was seldom, if ever direct about revealing or claiming that he was the long-awaited Messiah that Israel had been expecting for literally hundreds of years.

Yes, it may surprise you to learn that Jesus of Nazareth, as he was known during his time on earth, was only one of perhaps dozens of men wandering around Israel with a band of followers and talking about God. Many of the others claimed explicitly to be the Messiah, the deliverer, the Savior, as promised in the Hebrew Scriptures.

When we read the Christmas story every year, we read passages from the Prophet Isaiah, who assured the people of a new king, descended from the beloved King David, who would somehow restore Israel to its former greatness. Now in Jesus' day, Israel as he knew it was poor. The people were essentially enslaved by the Roman Empire. They did have a Jewish government, led by King Herod, but Herod, ultimately had to answer to the Romans. The Romans, for their part, kept Herod comfortable so he would have no reason to speak against them.

At the same time, the Romans had a policy of being tolerant of local religions, to a point. The Jewish authorities, the Pharisees, Sadducees, Priests, and Scribes, were the official leaders of the Jewish religion. Jesus, we sometimes forget, was a Jew, a Jewish rabbi, or teacher. In theory, he had to answer to the priests, etc. for what he said and did. That is why in the gospels we see the establishment challenging him so often.

But the main concern of the Jewish authorities was to make sure they never, ever, did anything to bother the Romans. Sure, the Romans were tolerant — to a point. Anyone, priest, rabbi, or self-proclaimed Messiah who threatened to disrupt things would be swiftly dealt with.

Therefore, during his early ministry, Jesus did not explicitly reveal that he was the Messiah sent from God to restore Israel. Only at the end, when he knew he would be going to the cross, did he tell the Romans and religious authorities who he was. Otherwise, everyone, including his own disciples, were left guessing. Even when Peter, Jesus' right-hand man, said on several occasions to Jesus that he believed him to be the Messiah, Jesus did not tell him, "Yes, you're right! I am!" Jesus let his sermons, teachings, and visible signs speak for him. Either you listened to Jesus' understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures and accepted his interpretation, or you didn't. Either you witnessed his miracles and believed that his power came from God, or you didn't.

Even today, two thousand years later, the question you and I have to answer every day is whether Jesus of Nazareth is in fact Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior of the World,

the Great I Am. Moreover, if you accept that this man who lived so long ago is the Chosen One of God, so what?! What does Jesus being the Messiah have to do with you and me? What difference does Jesus make in your life? How does he touch you? How does he heal you? How does he change you the person you are today to the person He knows you can be?

In short, by not explicitly declaring himself the Messiah during his earthly ministry, Jesus avoided problems with the religious and secular authorities. Yes, he had problems with them, but imagine how much worse they would have been if he called himself the promised Savior. However, because Jesus was seldom straightforward in revealing himself, he continues to force us, twenty centuries later, to do the hard, prayerful, and sometimes painful work of deciding for ourselves who Jesus is, and what he came to do for us as individuals and for the world as a whole.

However, there was one exception to the rule. Today we read an abbreviated version of John Chapter four which tells of Jesus' encounter of a Samaritan woman at a well. It is to this woman, and this woman only, that Jesus explicitly told that he was the Messiah. Nowhere else in the gospels does Jesus reveal his "secret identity," not even to his closest followers. To his disciples, Jesus left the guessing. But to this woman, he told her the truth. Why her? What was so special about her?

Actually, by the standards of her society, there was absolutely nothing special about her. In fact, she was completely the opposite of special. In the eyes of world, and especially in the eyes of her fellow villagers, she was dirt.

Let's look at the encounter of Jesus and this woman more closely and see what clues it gives as to why Jesus might have decided to reveal to fact to her and only her that he was the Messiah.

First, let us recall when Jesus met the woman. It was noon. So what, we say. Well, in those days, noon was not the time people would go and fetch water to bring home. We've had five heat waves this year. Israel is pretty much like that all the time during summer. Perhaps not has humid, but hot, really hot. Remember, no modern plumbing, not even a convenient river, just a well where everyone had to go. Thus if you wanted to get water, the time to go was at sunrise, before the heat.

The simple fact was that this woman was fetching her water at noon not because she wanted to, but because she had to. In villages then, as now, there is an extraordinary sense of community and bonding. People tended to do things together. Women and girls would rise early and make their way to the well in the cool of the morning. But not the woman Jesus met. She had to go later — not with the group. She had to go in heat. And believe me, if you think carrying a five gallon water bucket on your head is hard in the morning, imagine doing that in the heat of the day!

No, this woman was rejected from the community. She lived in the village, everyone knew her. But she had no friends. Jesus told the woman he knew why. This woman had been with six men and

was living out of wedlock with number seven. That was an absolute scandal. Even today, it might raise a few eyebrows. Clearly, this woman was considered a terrible human being, beneath contempt and, to her shock and dismay, she met a total stranger who knew all about her! Strike 1.

Of course, we cannot ignore the fact that the woman Jesus met was, well, a woman. The woman was quite right to be shocked that a man was speaking to her directly. Traditionally, the only man who could speak to a woman was her husband. Back then, in every society, women were considered secondary, inferior creatures whose main purpose was to bear children. We still see evidence of this attitude today — even in this country, sad to say. Under Roman law, it was perfectly legal for a husband to kill his wife (or even children) and face no consequences. We see, I am sorry to admit, certain passages even in our own Bible that women could be considered second-class humans. As we know, women until within the past 200 years were not literate, certainly not educated, and seldom consulted by kings, princes, or even their own husbands as to how things ought to be. Strike 2.

Then, of course, the question of ethnicity. The woman was a Samaritan. Samaritans were a kind of Jew but was universally rejected by so called “regular” Jews. Samaritans accepted the five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy as Scripture, but rejected everything else. They believed this for hundred of years. By the time of Jesus, they had essentially been forced to live on their own reservation and were to be avoided at all costs. Every foul thing Jews could imagine about a human being were attributed to them. Just as the Nazis despised the Jews, just as some in our country despise immigrants — especially Latinos — today, the Jews of Jesus’ day despised the Samaritans. Samaritans, to most Jews, were sub-human. Strike 3.

Yet it was only to this woman, this a) woman of b) a questionable past and c) a despised ethnic background, that Jesus chose to reveal that he was indeed the promised Messiah. Why her?

Remember at the beginning of the sermon I said that during Jesus’ lifetime, there were literally dozens of self-proclaimed Messiahs wandering around Israel. Most them attracted a following by claiming they would throw out the Romans and make Israel rich and powerful again, like it was in the days of King David and King Solomon. Wealth and power, in the opinion of most, wealth and power were the way to fix everything, isn’t it? It still is today, isn’t it? If our government and business leaders over the centuries weren’t after wealth and power, for the most part, I don’t know what they wanted.

This disgraced Samaritan woman at the well stands in opposition to wealth and power. She was hated because of her past, she was hated because of her gender, she was hated because of her nationality. In terms of material possessions, she had nothing. In terms of power, she had nothing.

In the eyes of the world, this woman was a big, fat, zero, the dregs of society, the scum of the earth, a loser.

Can you understand a bit as to why Jesus chose her and only her to reveal that he is the Son of God, the promised Messiah?

Jesus was and is the ultimate opposite of what the world, even what many Americans, stand for. Jesus was and is critical of wealth for the sake of wealth. He was and is critical of power for the sake of power. He spent much of ministry teaching and healing the poor, the sick, the foreigners, the outcasts, and hated — every loser, in short, who supposedly doesn't belong.

Jesus boldly says to this woman, violating the conventions of his own society as well as hers, Jesus boldly says, YOU BELONG! I don't care what's happened in your past, YOU BELONG! I don't care that you're a woman, YOU BELONG! I don't care you're a Samaritan, YOU BELONG!

How opposite can you get? How different can it be? By coming to church and worshipping Jesus Christ, you are in your own way declaring your solidarity with the despised, the hated, the outcasts of the world, no matter why they are despised, hated, and outcasts. And that, my friends, includes you!

What! No preacher, you're wrong! I'm not despised, I'm not hated, I'm not an outcast! Sure, preacher, it's great that Jesus included that woman and accepted her, but really, preacher, I have very little in common with her.

Oh really? We have nothing in common with her? Yes, on the outside, it may appear that we have nothing in common with the Samaritan woman at the well. Sure, most of us have or have had good jobs; most of us are educated; most of us seldom, if ever, encounter difficulties in life because of our ethnicity or gender. So, yes, on the surface, we seem to have little in common with that woman.

However, that assumption would be a mistake. When she finished her encounter with Jesus, that woman knew in her heart of hearts that God truly loved her and accepted her just as she was. She knew that despite everything she was saved. She knew that she belonged.

As for us, I'm not sure we really know or believe that God in Jesus Christ loves us and accepts us right now, just as we are. Yes, I say it to you. We say it to ourselves every week after the Prayer of Confession — but do we really believe it?

Friends, I know there are many here in this room who don't like themselves. I know there are many who are driven by terrible guilt about what they have done or failed to do in their lives. I know there are many who are filled with hatred toward partners, children, bosses, and others — hatred that they can't let go of. I know there are many who are filled with doubt and fear about tomorrow and can't trust anyone or anything.

Yes, none of these things I've mentioned are visible from the outside. They are not obvious signs like gender or nationality. But in terms of strikes against us, they are just as real. If you are consumed with fear, self-doubt, hatred, anger, and so many other demons whispering in our ears telling us how useless we are — then you need Jesus in your life every bit as much as that Samaritan woman did. We, yes we, have three or more strikes against us — only it's not that obvious and we're not admitting it.

But whether the strikes are on the outside, as the Samaritan woman's were, or on the inside, as many of ours are, they are strikes nonetheless.

All I can say to you is this: You need, I need, we all need to hear the good news and believe it with every fiber of our being. I AM LOVED! YOU ARE LOVED! WE ARE LOVED! I AM ACCEPTED! YOU ARE ACCEPTED! WE ARE ACCEPTED! I BELONG! YOU BELONG! WE ALL BELONG!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.