

***Loving God, Changing Lives:
The Woman, the Well, and Jesus***
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church Rev. Mary Koon
March 15, 2020 John 4:5-24

This morning we will head to the well with Jesus as we continue our Lenten sermon series about loving God and changing lives.

Last week, Jesus met with Nicodemus, the leader of the Jews, a Pharisee who was educated, successful, well connected. They met in the dark of night, concealed in the shadows. Nicodemus came with facts ready to question Jesus.

In contrast, today Jesus will meet with a Samaritan woman, someone so insignificant that she is not even given a name in the Bible. Presumably, she is an outsider, both in her community and with Jews. We can figure this out because she was fetching water for her household during the heat of day, rather than in early morning with the other women from town. Unlike Nicodemus, instead of meeting in the darkest night, they meet in the bright light of the noonday sun, exposed and open.

At this point in history, the Jews and Samaritan had hated one another for centuries. Though they shared a common ancestry, they developed different cultures, different customs, different sacred spaces. The Jewish people destroyed the Samaritan's temple on Mt. Gerizim and then banned Samaritans from the Temple in Jerusalem after the Samaritans desecrated it.

Samaritans and Jews didn't speak to one another, and men didn't speak to women in public - both would have been outrageous in Jesus' day. But Jesus did outrageous things for the sake of the reconciliation of the world, and thank God for that!

As is the pattern throughout the Gospel of John, the woman at the well initially misunderstands Jesus – she understands everything he says literally,

while he speaks on a spiritual level. The contrast works, I think, as a literary tool to help us move beyond easy, conventional ways of looking at faith and life. It also makes for some very interesting conversation!

It is said that all stories start with one of two situations: a person went on a journey, or a stranger came to town. This story is the latter.

I'll be reading from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*. I think that the writing brings a fresh look to this familiar story.

John 4:5-24

⁴⁻⁶To get to Galilee, Jesus had to pass through Samaria. He came into Sychar, a Samaritan village that bordered the field Jacob had given his son Joseph. Jacob's well was still there. Jesus, worn out by the trip, sat down at the well. It was noon.

⁷⁻⁸A woman, a Samaritan, came to draw water. Jesus said, "Would you give me a drink of water?" (His disciples had gone to the village to buy food for lunch.)

⁹The Samaritan woman, taken aback, asked, "How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" (Jews in those days wouldn't be caught dead talking to Samaritans.)

¹⁰Jesus answered, "If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking *me* for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water."

¹¹⁻¹²The woman said, "Sir, you don't even have a bucket to draw with, and this well is deep. So how are you going to get this 'living water'? Are you a better man than our ancestor Jacob, who dug this well and drank from it, he and his sons and livestock, and passed it down to us?"

¹³⁻¹⁴Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give, will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life."

¹⁵The woman said, “Sir, give me this water so I won’t ever get thirsty, won’t ever have to come back to this well again!”

¹⁶He said, “Go call your husband and then come back.”

(Pause)

¹⁷⁻¹⁸“I have no husband,” she said.

“That’s nicely put: ‘I have no husband.’ You’ve had five husbands, and the man you’re living with now isn’t even your husband. You spoke the truth there, sure enough.”

¹⁹⁻²⁰“Oh, so you’re a prophet! Well, tell me this: Our ancestors worshiped God at this mountain, but you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place for worship, right?”

²¹⁻²³“Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you Samaritans will worship God neither here at this mountain nor there in Jerusalem. You worship guessing in the dark; we Jews worship in the clear light of day. God’s way of salvation is made available through the Jews. But the time is coming—it has, in fact, come—when what you’re called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter.

²³⁻²⁴“It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people God is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly *themselves* before God in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship God must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.” AMEN

Our sermon series, and our Oak Grove Mission Statement (Loving God...Changing Lives) affirms and illuminates the truth that love is unique in its power to evoke substantive and lasting change.

Jesus met the Samaritan woman at a well in the hot, dry, desert, and offered her living water that will be an artesian well within that just keeps flowing forever.

Jesus accepted her and talked with her, without passing judgement or shame. And she, in turn, didn't hoard this love, but spread it. The unnamed woman brought more than one or two to Jesus that day, reading forward in chapter 4, she converted an entire town.

The woman did it by telling her story. She didn't have to use scare tactics or theatrics – just the heart-felt truth she felt newly free to share. The usefulness of her story to others became greater than the secret she was keeping.

Like the stream of water that smooths a rock after years of flowing, love can shape our lives to bring greater acceptance of ourselves, and compassion for others.

Fear, anger or facts may sway opinion or motivate change for a while, but cannot bring about lasting transformation the way only love can.

Change that comes as a result of intellectual assent or fear eventually gives way to old habits of thought and action. This is the case for personal, social and cultural shifts.

We are experiencing lots of shifting sands in our lives at this moment in history. And God is our rock, our steady place!

It has been quite a week.

My story, your story, our church's story is now integrated into the world story of the pandemic of the Corona virus. I am generally fairly non-reactive, but by Friday, even I could feel tentacles of fear begin to lash my heart.

We face relentlessly fearful and anxious times in our world. News of the Covid19 is practically all we hear and talk about – or can think of. Broadway

shuttered, college and professional sports shut down, school closings. Shelves in big-box stores empty where there used to be toilet paper, pasta, and canned fruit.

We are people of faith, not fear. When fear begins to take hold of our lives, Christ's living water transforms that fear to peace, and this is what our world needs now.

My friend Steven Koski writes, "If you move into the world standing on the inner landscape of fear, you will bring more fear into the world. If you stand on the inner landscape of calm and peace, you will bring more peace into the world."

In the spirit of the transformative power of love through living water, I offer you some thoughts on these odd and unsettling times.

Please know that the staff and Session of Oak Grove will be meeting just after the 10:45 am service to consider next steps in light of recommendations from the CDC, our Presbytery, our governor. We will listen to their wisdom and to the wisdom of one another. Any temporary restrictions or cancellations or adjustments to our worship and program schedule will be made in the spirit of love and care, and not panic and fear. Whatever decisions the Session makes, Pastor Anne and I will continue to offer pastoral care, though it may look different – more calls, emails, and notes, for example.

While being restricted from our usual activities – here and in the community – may feel like we're *not* doing, in a very real way we are doing a lot – caring for the well-being and health of our community.

If worship goes on-line temporarily, we can remember Jesus' words to the woman at the well – God wants us to worship in spirit and in truth, with authenticity -- pews not always required!

This pandemic comes during the church season of Lent, traditionally a time when the faithful are encouraged to slow down, to take an honest look at our

lives, to connect more deeply with God, to listen to that still small voice. Lent recalls Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness without food and water, and his eventual temptations from the devil. And it kind of does feel like wilderness time right now, doesn't it, when we may have more questions than answers. A perfect time to lean into God's goodness and love, to be still, to pray, to cultivate gratitude.

This pandemic illustrates in a graphic way, the truth that we are inextricably bound to one another. In it, we see clearly that our actions have the potential for cosmic circumstances. While fear whispers to us that it's about me and mine, love counters boldly that it's about us. The temptation of fear and panic is to turn inward, but love spirals us outward.

As we practice social distancing, we will purposely focus on creative and collaborative ways to support one another and stay connected as community. Here are a couple of ideas:

First, please pray for the containment of the virus, for those who are sick the world over, for medical personnel, and for the Oak Grove community. Please pray for children whose schools are cancelled and parents who scramble for safe places for their kids. For people who face job insecurity and all who may be negatively affected financially by the pandemic.

Second, help out if you can and it is safe for you. I would like to form a team of people who are willing to make phone calls and send notes each week to those who can't get out, and a few who would be willing to deliver groceries or medicine to people. Please let me know if you are willing to help OR if you would like some help with groceries or medicine.

And finally, take good care of yourselves. Treat yourselves with gentleness, love and grace, the way God would. Practice forgiveness, seek beauty. Get outside – nature hasn't been shut down! Read a good book, read THE good book, start a journal, listen to a podcast or an opera, call an old friend, bake a cake, start a quilt, write a letter, take a walk. Nurture your soul in quiet. Listen to music that uplifts.

Parker Palmer wrote, “Self-care is never a selfish act. It is simply good stewardship of the only gift we have, the gift we were put on earth to offer others. At any time, we can listen to our true self and give it the care it requires. We do it not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch.”

This is hard, but we can do hard things. God meets us where we are and as we are and will bring us forward.

I want to end on a note of joy and human resilience:

Our Youth Director, Britta, lost her phone on Thursday. It fell out of her pocket in an industrial area of St. Paul. She assumed it was stolen or hopelessly lost. This morning her mother received a call letting her know that her phone was safe and sound. What kindness and goodness in this time of uncertainty! What humanity!

And just this morning, with the decision to cancel Faith Formation made last night, our amazing children’s teacher, Laura Orr, put together an on-line Sunday school lesson. That’s thinking creatively and helpfully! We are so grateful.

Finally, I heard about a town in Italy who found a way to connect with one another despite being in isolation. Someone recorded the people of Sienna singing a version of their local folk song out of their windows, joining voices above the empty streets, helping them feel less alone.

Love is real! God is good.

Thanks be to God. AMEN