

The Rev. John Sampson, Pastor
Glen Ridge Congregational Church

Living Water



Sunday, March 8, 2026

John 4:5 - 42

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

I've often heard members of our congregation wonder out loud how we can get people to come to our church. And there's something behind this wondering. It's really a question about how we can get our neighbors to become interested in what we're up to in our church, and maybe, just maybe, if people knew more about us, they might just want to join us.

Many here remember a time when we had so many more people in the pews, so many more kids in church school, many more

candidates for our church leadership. To wonder how we could get more people to come to our church is, I think, really a question about how we could stop the contraction that our church has experienced over the last years and decades. To think about what kind of programming or events we could have to get more people into our church, to have more people interested in what we do, expresses an anxiety about where we are as a congregation, and what the future will hold for us, especially when we compare it to the past.

But are we thinking about this in the right way? If Jesus, our brother and our teacher, the one we call the Christ, if he were here with us this morning, would he think we were asking the right question? Or would he redirect our vision to a different set of questions? Would he redirect our perspective and ask us to think in new ways about our sense of mission, and how we do this thing called “church”?

There he is, on a hot day, after he’s been walking and traveling through the countryside feeding and healing, preaching and sharing his vision of his new community with anyone who will listen, walking inexorably towards Jerusalem and the cross. And he’s tired and he’s thirsty.

He sits down by a well to rest.

He doesn’t wait that long and a Samaritan woman comes to draw water. We don’t know her name. But she is doing the work of her daily life. He asks her for some water, and she’s surprised that a

Jewish man would engage with her because she's Samaritan, and because she is a woman. And under that hot sun, at the edge of that well, in the ordinariness of that day, Jesus opens his mouth...and he changes her life.

He tells her that he is the living water. He looks into her life and he tells her of the grief of losing so many husbands. He reveals to her her possible shame around living with a man who isn't her husband. He tells her no longer will she meet God on a special mountain, or in the temple in Jerusalem, but that she has met God right there, in him, right in the middle of her daily chores.

What if this story wasn't about an unnamed woman meeting Jesus, but is actually about us, you and me, meeting the Christ today? What if this story was about what it looks like to be followers of Christ in a world so different from the world of first-century Palestine? What might Jesus be telling us?

He might be telling us that we don't need to come to this place, this church, this building to find God moving through our lives, and the life of the world. Like living water, he might be telling us that God's presence moves through our lives just like the dynamic water of a stream moves through a riverbed. And that this water finds us in the ordinariness of our lives. Maybe he is showing us that the real work of ministry doesn't take place here, in this sanctuary, but that we are called to move out beyond these walls and meet people where they are, where they are living, in the places that hold their grief and their shame. Maybe he's telling us that the real work of being his

followers in this world isn't found in this building, or on this corner of Ridgewood and Clark, and that we shouldn't be thinking about how we can get people to come to us, but that we should be thinking about the need to leave this place and go to them.

Jesus meets us as a tired and thirsty man. He is God's presence here in this world, but not as a superhuman being, a being untouched by the limitations of humanity. He is God's presence in this world as one of us, fully. In his thirst and in his fatigue he shows us that he understands us because he is living our lives.

The thing that seems to make such an impact on the woman he meets by the well is that he can see her, and engages with her, not because she is perfect, and not as an opportunity to judge her. He interacts with her on her own terms. He tells her of the truth of her life, and she is seen in all of her fullness, by a Jewish man under a hot sun, and by God, the Creator of that blessed day.

What if we are called to leave this building to do the good work that the Christ calls us to do, and engage with people not in judgement, not with our hearts hardened so that we will not be touched by the messiness of their lives? But what if we left this building with our hearts open, carrying the messiness of our lives, the limitations of who we truly are, meeting people on their own terms, offering ourselves in all of our complexity? Not judging, but telling the truth? Would we not become Christ's living water, a dynamic and life-giving gift, a gift not calm and reserved only to be found in this building, but

an expression of God's love that might want to stay with those we met in their communities?

Maybe then the people we meet would, just like the townspeople of today's story, say that they had heard about Glen Ridge Congregational Church, but now that they had met us, and that we had stayed with them, maybe just maybe they would say that now they believed.

Amen.