

A Personal Relationship with Jesus Christ

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Preaching on:
John 4:5–42

Last week as we were speaking about what it means to be born again, we started talking a little bit about what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And I want to explore that question with you all this morning a little bit more using Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well as an illustration of the kind of relationship that I believe Jesus is looking for with us.

The first thing, and the most obvious thing that we can say about Jesus's interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well is that Jesus initiates relationships with people that even his closest followers don't understand or approve of. Jesus initiates relationships with people that even—or maybe we might want to say, *especially* his closest followers—do not understand or approve of. Jesus was interacting with a woman who was a Samaritan. She can't believe it herself that this guy wants to talk to her. She corrects him. She says, don't you know this is socially unacceptable? I'm a woman by myself at a well at about noon. You're a man sitting all by yourself. And let's not even talk about the fact that you're a Jew and I'm a Samaritan. And what would a Jew want with a Samaritan? Jesus is crossing boundaries here, social and religious boundaries, gender boundaries that make his culture (and maybe even to a certain extent our culture and maybe even the Samaritan woman herself) a little bit uncomfortable. Now, we live in a very different world than Jesus lived in and I'm assuming most likely (though this isn't true in all places in the world, but of those of us here in this sanctuary) you probably don't have a problem with men speaking to women in public places alone, unaccompanied. You probably don't have a problem with that. You probably don't have any strong feelings one way or the other about Samaritans because there are not very many of them left. You've probably never even met one.

So, I think it's important for us to question for ourselves, what is our version of Jesus's interaction with the Samaritan woman? What is your version of this? Who is the person that you feel like, oh Jesus, no, no, no, no, no. Not my Jesus. Not my Jesus. My Jesus would not go there. My Jesus would not talk to that person. My Jesus has nothing but condemnation and judgment for a person like that. Or my Jesus would stay as far

away from someone like that as possible. It just wouldn't be appropriate. It wouldn't be religiously appropriate. It wouldn't be socially appropriate. It's just not right.

Now, we can imagine all kinds of people who this might be for ourselves or for others. We can imagine it might be somebody who's way, way out on the left. It might be someone who's way, way out on the right. It might be someone who is very, very different from us. They may come from a different culture, a different country, they may have a different color skin. Or it may be someone who is exactly like us, and that's what we can't stand. But whoever it is, we all have our version of somebody that we believe that Jesus would want nothing to do with because of who they are or because of the inappropriateness of the situation. And so I want you to, just for a moment, imagine that person for yourself. The person that you believe should be the person that Jesus is the furthest away from in this world because of who they are, because of what they do or do not believe, because of the ways in which they behave. The person that you believe is the furthest away from Jesus.

And I think that Jesus's interaction with the woman at the well tells us that that person who we believe in our hearts must be the furthest from Jesus, who knows nothing of Jesus, who Jesus wouldn't want anything to do with, somewhere, somehow Jesus is at the well with that person trying to build a relationship based in spirit and truth. Jesus builds relationships with people that even, or maybe especially his closest followers, do not understand or approve of. And so when we find ourselves not understanding, not approving, it's best to remember that that's Jesus's way.

It's also important to remember that as Jesus is building this relationship with the woman at the well, he's not berating her for some sort of sin or some sort of shortcoming. Because when we think about Jesus actually hanging out with someone we don't like, we might start to think, well, maybe that would be good because Jesus could tell them all the things that he doesn't like about them. And that would be the same things that I don't like about them. And Jesus could tell them all the ways that they're wrong and Jesus could tell them to straighten up. But when we look at the Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well, we don't see that at all. Jesus isn't talking to her about her sins or her shortcomings. We have a Christian interpretation has frequently tried to make it about that. So one of the ways that Jesus's interaction with this woman is explained is that she is some sort of a fallen woman. She's a prostitute. And the evidence for this, and that Jesus is talking to her about not being a prostitute anymore and coming away from a life of sin is that she's had five husbands and the one she's with now is not her husband. And Jesus tells her about this even though she's hiding it from Jesus. But that is not a strong indication of a life of prostitution. We talked about this a few weeks ago when we talked about divorce in Jesus's cultural context. Leaving your husband was not something that was socially or legally possible or religiously possible for women in Jesus' day. You could not just run through husbands and then leave a guy and just go find another husband because maybe he was better. In fact, what divorce looked like, if you want to call it divorce, was frequently the abandonment of women. And for a woman to have gone through five husbands—that would not have been her doing; it would've been an exceptional run of bad luck. Perhaps she was married to an older man at a young age. She was bereaved. Perhaps she became a widow, then she had to maybe move on to that man's brother or another man in the family. Perhaps she was found to be infertile. She couldn't produce children. And so that meant that a husband or two decided to abandon her, dismiss her, and leave her without any sort of support. And now word has gotten around perhaps that she's bad luck or that she's infertile. So she has no means to support herself. And she's forced to live with a

man who will not offer her the protection of marriage, but is willing to support her as long as she lives with him. This is not something that she has done wrong, and it's not a sign of prostitution. Jesus is telling her, I understand what you have been through. I know what's going on. I understand your pain. I feel your pain. I recognize it. Jesus wants a full and personal relationship with the woman at the well. He doesn't want her to feel like she has to hide anything. And so he lets her know you can't hide anything. So, there's no reason to try. And there's not going to be any judgment from me (the way you have perhaps been judged by the rest of the world.)

Which leads us to living water—what is it? Jesus offers the woman at the well living water. Living water, which Jesus says will gush up to eternal life. This living water is an inner transformation. There is nothing that can be hidden. Everything is known because the process of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is taking place within you, not outside of you, where we have all of our other relationships with people and we can put on a mask and we can hide lots of things that we don't like about ourselves, right? We don't share that. We don't talk about that. We don't reveal that. We might be very, very close to somebody, but there is nobody who knows everything about you. There is nobody who knows everything about me. I have one or two little secrets, things that I'm ashamed of, things that bother me, things that I don't want to face, and I hide them. You cannot hide them from God.

Last week we talked about the process of being born again or born from above. The Holy Spirit comes and gets ya from the top to the bottom. And now Jesus makes a move here with the Samaritan woman. To Nicodemus he says, you have to be born from above—from the outside. And now Jesus is saying, you've looked to the spirit on the outside, and that's the way you've related to God. Now there's going to be living water on the inside flowing up, gushing up to eternal life. And so the way that we look to a relationship with God, a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, is not a relationship on the outside. We don't look for God outside anymore. We don't look for God outside. We begin to turn within, not turning into myself, but turning into the gift that the Spirit has given me—that living water, which is gushing up to eternal life. In Protestantism, we have often thought about salvation as a prayer that I say, and then I get saved. Or it's a confession that I make, a confession of belief. Or maybe I get baptized. And then—skip to the very end—when I die, I go to heaven. That's salvation. But a relationship with Jesus cannot be reduced down to a particular prayer that is said at one particular time. A *relationship* with Jesus is not a set of beliefs that you have acquiesced to or are making a confession to. It's not even a sacrament. A relationship with Jesus is a total transformation of your life from the inside out. It's a transformation of your will, your purpose, your perspective, your identity. You are being transformed. There is living water inside of you. You don't drink from the outside anymore. And that spring that is in you is gushing up to eternal life. In other words, it is the process of transformation with the spirit, the process of transformation that starts right now, that is leading you to eternal life. It is not that you say the prayer, you get the eternal life, and then hey, maybe, hopefully there's a little bit of a change along the way. In the intervening decades, hopefully you begin to think of yourself a little bit differently, you give yourself to God and to your neighbors and love more deeply and fully. No, it is the transformation that leads to eternal life. That is the process. That's what's happening within us with the spirit.

So imagine that person who you think Jesus should be the furthest from. And think about the fact that when Jesus is in a relationship with them, it is not an external relationship of bringing them in line with what we believe they should be brought in line with. It is a relationship of Jesus flowing within them, knowing them,

becoming a part of them, bubbling up in them, producing eternal life that can be shared and spread. It's on the inside.

And so that brings me to my final point of this week with the Samaritan woman at the well. The Samaritan woman's relationship with Jesus is not founded upon her knowledge of God. It is not founded upon her knowledge of God. She doesn't know anything. She doesn't know who Jesus is. She has no idea. She eventually comes around to realize that he's a prophet, maybe even the Messiah, but she doesn't know anything about him. And you know, Jesus seems to think that, as a Samaritan, she doesn't really know much about the right way of being properly religious towards God, which is the Jewish way of being religious towards God. But Jesus says, don't worry because we're coming to a new phase. We're coming to a phase where it's not your mountain and my mountain, and my way is right and your way is wrong. We're coming to a new phase where we will worship in spirit and in truth together.

And the Samaritan woman runs out to tell everyone back at home that she has maybe met the Messiah. And her evidence for this is not that she really knows anything about him. Her evidence of this and the foundation of her relationship is the fact that he told her everything about her. Her relationship with Jesus is not founded on what she knows about Jesus. It is founded on the fact that she is known by God. And now she knows that she is known by God. But so often in churches and especially in Protestant life (I know I've been dragging on Protestants lately, but it's just the tradition I'm closest to and wrestling with most deeply) where it is that we get stuck is we think, well, I need to know something about God. I'm going to read my Bible. I'm going to go to Bible study. I'm going to listen very carefully to Pastor Jeff's sermon. I'm going to get books on theology and devotional books. And the point of these books is to get me knowledge of God. And as I know more about God, my relationship with God will grow. But Jesus flips this on its head with the Samaritan woman at the well. He says, it is not what you know about me. It is not what you know about God. It is not about having the correct dogma. It is not about worshiping on the right mountain. You could be a complete stranger to me. You might have never even heard my name before. But once you realize that I know you fully, the spring begins to bubble up.

There's nothing wrong with knowing a lot about God. And if we were to raise hands and to talk about who knows the most about God, I would certainly be near the top of the list. I've spent a lot of time reading books about God. A lot of time. There's nothing wrong with that. But if I spend all my time reading books about God and no time in the practice of remembering that I am known, then I'm going to be lost. I need to come back to prayer and meditation. I need to come back to a little bit of fasting maybe, and ritual, and spending time in God's presence, letting myself remember that God knows me, and then going out and telling people (in a sermon!) it's not what I know about God. It's what God knows about me. And God knows everything about me, the good and the bad, the beautiful and the painful. And God has redeemed it all. And there is a fountain, a spring of life coming alive within me and within you through the Holy Spirit that Christ has given us. So please spend a little time this lent turning within to the place that you find God in the midst of your life and beauty and pain. God is within you bubbling up to eternal life.