

"To Reconcile"
Third in a Lenten Series
John 4:1-30
March 24, 2019
Pastor Jenothy Irvine

Prayer - To the God who created all things
The God who so loved the world
The God who breaks barriers both great and small,
To that God, may our hearts be open, our ears attuned, our minds clear,
and our thirsty souls prepared to be drenched in your living water of truth.
AMEN

Scripture - Our scripture today takes us into the life of an unknown woman. The narrative of her life is surrounded by scandal, heartbreak, judgement, injustice, and isolation. It stands in the face of social norms and expectations and drowns out the voices of division and hate with a simple cup of water.

All those who have ears to hear, let them hear. John 4:1-30 - READ TEXT

I have to tell you, as I was reminded when preparing today's sermon, the hardest part of writing a sermon is trying to take all the information of culture, history, language, the essence of God's restoring power and the unimaginable impossible love and sacrifice of Jesus, and share it in a way that you all will listen to it. In a way you might find interesting and invites you to care about what it means for your life.

Take today's text for example. Seems pretty straight forward right? You have probably heard this story a hundred times. Jesus meets some chic with a colorful and troubled past. They chat, he speaks truth and because he is Jesus he knows all about her endeavors and offers her what only Jesus can, a cup of water like nothing she has ever had or pulled from the well before - he offers to love and accept her. She finally

gets it, sort of. She is perplexed yet excited, and runs off to tell others what happened. Another win for team Jesus, the end. Amen.

I think we all know I wouldn't let you go with that short of a sermon. We know there is much more to this story. It is my job, with the presence of the Holy Spirit of course, to help you realize the significance of this moment between Jesus and this woman. It is a moment that should cause us to sit up, pay attention and be changed. It is a moment that should change the way we see those who are outside our acceptability scale.

It is subtle, seemingly insignificant. But what if we pulled out the most important words. What if we sat at the well long enough to fill in some of the blanks? What if we captured the intense emotions, deep truths, and brought to the surface what really happened that day at the well? Would that make a difference for you? Listen to the retelling of the text we just read, listen carefully however, or you might miss it.

VIDEO

To be loved is to be known - to be known is to be loved. We've been talking about the power and importance of words; words we speak, words we hear, words we live by. Of all those words, the ones I just quoted may be the most important ones yet. Loved and known.

Isn't that what anyone ultimately wants. At the end of the day, in the center of who they are, who we are? Behind the masks we wear and the smiles we show to the world. Beneath the job titles, performance numbers, and list of credentials? Below all the surface stuff we fill our minds and conversations with trying to convince one another how important we are, or how "just fine" we are doing? What we want is to be loved

and known for who we are and not a title, label, box, minority, or subset we might be a part of.

So too, the woman at the well. But what makes her dialogue with Jesus even more unique, is that it is not only about her as an individual but her as a people. In her story she comes to represent a long standing division and deep seated hatred between the Jews, which Jesus was, and Samaritans, which she was. Jews and Samaritans. They didn't agree on a lot of things, but one of the biggest issues was that the Jews were raised and taught to believe the Samaritans were a mixed race and therefore were unclean, flawed, and less than. These were people who were once Jews, but after the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Samaria, they were left behind and eventually intermarried outsiders and foreigners also left from the attack, therefore losing their Jewish racial purity. They were tainted, disgusting, and worthless to the Jewish people and they avoided them at all cost.

The feeling was mutual from the other side of the barrier. This was a feud that was more than 400 years old at the time of Jesus, yet it smoldered as resentfully and as bitterly as ever. She knew it and so did Jesus. So you see, it wasn't just her story Jesus was addressing that day, it was an entire people. In her was the story of two fiercely opposing groups, divided by religion, history and political power. Glad that doesn't happen anymore. Jesus was there that day to reconcile these two groups.

But wait, there's more. There is another barrier of Jesus' day she represents. She was not only a Samaritan, she was a woman and there were all kinds of rules, codes and cultural mandates of how women were treated and how men and women could and could not interact. Jesus was a Jew and a man, and not just any man, but a Rabbi. Strict Rabbinic rules forbid a Rabbi to greet a woman in public, not even his own wife or daughter or sister. For a Rabbi to be seen talking to a women in public was the

end of his status and reputation and in a shame / honor system like the one that surrounded Jesus' day, it meant certain dishonor and shame for them and their family.

Yet, here Jesus was, in broad daylight, not just in the presence of a woman he was not related or married to, but talking to her, listening to her, engaging with her in significant detail about emotionally charged issues of the day. Jesus again revealed who he was and why he came. Jesus was there to reconcile long standing cultural barriers and bring about his truth and peace.

But wait, there's more! If those two barriers weren't enough, a Samaritan and a woman, she was also a woman of notorious character. No decent man, let alone a Rabbi, would have been seen in her company, or exchanging a word with her. Five husbands and the man she was with when she met Jesus was not her husband. Yep, she was *that* woman and everyone knew it. No one cared how it might have happened. No one sought to hear her out. No one risked getting to know her as a person, in fact I imagine she had very few if any real friends. I actually think that is why Jesus met her at that particular well. There was one closer to her village, but it would have caused a potentially volatile scene and even put her life in danger if Jesus met her there.

Regardless of how she got there, her life experience left her in a place no one wanted to be - a place in Jesus' day for the widows, orphans, and strangers - the nobodys. A place in our day where we put the unwanted, unlovable, and unacceptable. She represents the barrier between "us and them" - in this case the Jews and Samaritans, men and women, and insider and outsider. In today's culture, she represents, well take your pick. Black / White - Hispanic / Latino - Native / Foreigner - Rich / Poor - Man / Woman - Gay / Straight - Liberal / Conservative - Refugee / Resident - Lost / Found - Literate / Illiterate - and on and on it goes.

This is not just a story about some unknown woman meeting Jesus at an old well. It is about Jesus breaking cultural barriers and showing us that reconciliation is possible. It is possible to reach beyond differences and long held prejudices, cultural injustices, and stereotypes. It is possible to find common ground.

But a lot of people don't want to hear it. Maybe you don't want to hear it. Maybe you are tired of hearing about it. Hearing about loving neighbor, building community, and sharing hope. Here's the thing church, "it" (whatever it is - whatever the current barrier building emotionally charged and polarizing hot topic is) it not going to go away if we ignore it, pretend its not there, or fool ourselves thinking it doesn't make it in these doors. As followers of Jesus we need to be willing to have the difficult conversations, and I believe this text can help us do just that.

You know what I find fascinating about this encounter between Jesus and this woman. He never says to her, "be ye healed," "your faith has made you well, go and sin no more" or some version of that, like he does in so many other personal encounters. Following other encounters Jesus has with individuals, he often speaks a word of forgiveness, healing, or direction. He doesn't declare her healed, set free, washed clean, or made whole. He doesn't tell her to "speak to no one of this," or "go tell it on the mountain."

That is why I don't think Jesus was there for her alone. I think he was there to speak truth to the barriers she represented. I think he was there to quench a thirst much deeper than that of a single individual, but rather, the thirst of a whole people. People the rest of us push aside, condemn, or even hate. I think he was there to show what it means to see the person and not just the issue, circumstance or controversy. I think he was there to confront cultural injustices, religious parameters, and historical / political power plays.

I think he was there dear church, for us. I think in that moment, he modeled for us how to reconcile the barriers we face today. Or at the very least acknowledge and talk about them. And he did so in an intentional way:

First he sought her out. He didn't have to go through Samaria. There was another route, longer yes, but still an option.

Second, he did it by making himself available. It couldn't have been comfortable sitting in the noon day heat, covered by dust and sweat from the walk, waiting for her to arrive. I'm sure he could have found something else to do or someplace else to go to keep busy or keep going.

Third, he did it by listening. (Pause). He didn't go off on her about her life, her DNA, her mental status, her choices, or her circumstance. He didn't start by hurling labels and accusations.

Fourth, he did it by speaking his truth in love. Only after seeking her out, making himself available, and listening, does Jesus then speak his truth to her and does so in love.

Reconciliation then happens when we seek to break down barriers between the "us and them." Reconciliation happens when we make ourselves available for the tough conversations. Reconciliation CANNOT and WILL NOT happen if we do not listen to one another and those who stand on the opposite side of the barrier. Finally, reconciliation happens when we speak truth in love.

I am not saying it is easy. I'm not saying Jesus offers some magical / mystical formula and all of sudden we are gathered around the campfire singing kumbaya. I am not saying to reconcile means to fully agree with those who think, feel or act differently than you. I am not saying it happens overnight or even in an afternoon sitting at the local well having a drink. I am saying it is possible, it needs to happen, and we need to at least try.

May the God who created all things

The God who so loved the world

The God who breaks barriers both great and small,

Open our hearts, attune our ears, prepare our minds, and drench our thirsty souls in the living water of Jesus' truth. AMEN