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John 4:1-26; 39-42
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Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

Franciscan priest Father Pat McClosky described the rift between the Jews and the Samaritans much like the hatred between the Serbs and Muslims in Bosnia, the Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, and the Crips and Bloods in Los Angeles.¹ In other words, centuries and centuries of bad blood within a family.

Let me see if I can quickly describe how this came about.

Jacob had twelve sons, each of which after returning from Egypt famine received different parcels in the Holy Land as their inheritance. In the 9th century BC, the Holy Land was then separated into two kingdoms, with Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Shortly after that, the northern King bought a section of land strategically located between the Sea of Galilee and Jerusalem. This land contained the main road that connected the two kingdoms to each other. He called it Samaria.

In the 7th century BC, the Assyrians attacked Samaria and took many of it's people captive. In the 5th century BC, the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Jewish temple, and likewise took many Jews into exile. Meanwhile, the Samaritans who continued to live in the Holy Land, intermarried with Gentiles, and even adopted some of their pagan worship practices.

When the Jewish Babylonian exiles were released after seventy years, they returned to Jerusalem. They hoped to rebuild the temple, restore Jewish life, and make Judah great again. Imagine the task before us today of rebuilding Gaza. The Samaritans offered to help, but the Jews viewed the Samaritans as renegade half bred idolators who's "dirty" hands would defile their holy temple. So they refused.

In the 1st century BC, the Jews destroyed the Samaritan temple at Mount Gerizim. And around the same time as Jesus' birth, the Samaritans desecrated the Jerusalem temple by scattering human bones in it. Tit for tat continued and deep hatred in the Holy Land has festered ever since.

This brings us to our scripture story today as Jesus and his disciples were traveling from Judea in the south to the Sea of Galilee in the north, when Jesus intentionally led them through Samaria on the way. Please join me in reading from John 4:1-26, then skipping over to 39-42.

¹ Pat McCloskey, OFM, "The Rift Between Jews and Samaritans," posted on Ask a Franciscan, on May 16, 2020 at <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/ask-a-franciscan/the-rift-between-jews-and-samaritans/>.

4 Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard about him. They had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John. **2** But in fact Jesus was not baptizing. His disciples were. **3** So Jesus left Judea and went back again to Galilee.

4 Jesus had to go through Samaria. **5** He came to a town in Samaria called Sychar. It was near the piece of land Jacob had given his son Joseph. **6** Jacob's well was there. Jesus was tired from the journey. So he sat down by the well. It was about noon.

7 A woman from Samaria came to get some water. Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" **8** His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.

9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew. I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" She said this because Jews don't have anything to do with Samaritans.

10 Jesus answered her, "You do not know what God's gift is. And you do not know who is asking you for a drink. If you did, you would have asked him. He would have given you living water."

11 "Sir," the woman said, "you don't have anything to get water with. The well is deep. Where can you get this living water?" **12** Our father Jacob gave us the well. He drank from it himself. So did his sons and his livestock. Are you more important than he is?"

13 Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again. **14** But anyone who drinks the water I give them will never be thirsty. In fact, the water I give them will become a spring of water in them. It will flow up into eternal life."

15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water. Then I will never be thirsty. And I won't have to keep coming here to get water."

16 He told her, "Go. Get your husband and come back."

17 "I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. **18** The fact is, you have had five husbands. And the man you live with now is not your husband. What you have just said is very true."

19 "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. **20** Our people have always worshiped on this mountain. But you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

21 Jesus said, "Woman, believe me. A time is coming when you will not worship the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem. **22** You Samaritans worship what you do not know. We worship what we do know. Salvation comes from the Jews. **23** But a new time is coming. In fact, it is already here. True worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth. They are the kind of worshipers the

Father is looking for. **24** God is spirit. His worshipers must worship him in the Spirit and in truth.”

25 The woman said, “I know that Messiah is coming.” Messiah means Christ. “When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

26 Then Jesus said, “The one you’re talking about is the one speaking to you. I am he.”

39 Many of the Samaritans from the town of Sychar believed in Jesus. They believed because of what the woman had said about him. She said, “He told me everything I’ve ever done.” **40** Then the Samaritans came to him and tried to get him to stay with them. So he stayed two days. **41** Because of what he said, many more people became believers.

42 They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said. We have now heard for ourselves. We know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

There are several questions I want to explore today that surface from our text. Why did Jesus have to go through Samaria? Why was this woman drawing water in the heat of the day and what is this gift of “living” water that Jesus offered her? What does it mean to worship God the Father in Spirit and in truth? What is Jesus saying to us today?

Does it strike anyone as odd that the story starts off saying, “Jesus had to go through Samaria?” The Greek word used for “had to” is a very simple word “dei.” It means to be needful, necessary, ought to, or should. It sort of implies that there wasn’t any other way around getting from point A in Judea to point B at the Sea of Galilee than going through Samaria. But that just wasn’t true.

Jews traveling from north to south or south to north would often take the much longer route, crossing over the Jordan River to the east, traveling north on the eastern banks, and then crossing over once they got to where they wanted to go. So that they would not step one foot in Samaria or have to cross paths with “THOSE” people. That would have been the route that Jesus’ disciples would have been most familiar.

But Jesus said. “NOPE. It is necessary for us, we ought to, we should go through Samaria so that we can deal with this deep-seated hatred that exists in your hearts toward our brothers and sisters called Samaritans. If you want any part in my kingdom..come..now! Dei!”

We can only imagine the grumbling that must have taken place among the disciples.

“Really Jesus! Do we HAVE to? I’d much rather keep this simple. No hassle. That way we can do ministry among OUR people in Galilee and build your kingdom with people who are just like US.”

But Jesus say’s, “NOPE. We’re going through Samaria. Dei!”

As they came to Sychar in Samaria they stopped near the ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there. So Jesus, tired, from the journey sat down at the well. Meanwhile, the disciples when off into town to buy some food. It was about noon.

When along comes this Samaritan woman drawing water.

Now it was customary for women to draw water earlier in the day, when the sun wasn’t so hot. Why would she come now? Some say that maybe, since she had had five husbands, and the man she was with now was not her husband, that her reputation followed her. Certainly she would have been the talk of women in the town. So maybe she came later to avoid them and their judgmental glares. Some say that maybe she had been up late the night before and so came out after she had woken up. But Jesus knew her. He looked into her heart and knew exactly why she had come.

You see, just like the disciples who wanted to avoid the Samaritans out of their racist hearts, she wanted to avoid her sin and others who might remind her just how far she had strayed from God. She was dead in her in sin and separated from God. Like Nicodemus, she preferred darkness, but HAD to come into the light. It was necessary for her, she ought to, she needed to cross paths with Jesus. Dei!

We can imagine her dismay when she comes to the well and sees a man there, a Jewish man none the less. This was not going to be simple and clean. It would be messy.

Remember in Jesus’ day, it wasn’t culturally appropriate for men and women to socialize. And then for a Jew to interact with a Samaritan was another level of inappropriateness.

Jesus asked her, “Will you give me a drink?”

One of the things I love about Jesus is that he does not respect the cultural barriers that often divide people into us and them. The Apostle Paul reminded the Church in Ephesus of just that saying, “For Jesus himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.”² Jesus through the way he interacted with this Samaritan woman destroyed the cultural walls of hostility that separated Jews from Samaritans. He asked her, an unclean vessel for water, risking becoming unclean himself.

² Ephesians 2:14

But it wasn't her water he wanted. She needed the water that only Jesus could give. So what was the difference between the two?

The woman was drawing water from a very old well that dated centuries back to their common ancestor, Jacob. Well water doesn't move. It doesn't aerate or get filtered like moving water does. At best it would keep someone alive, but it's not truly living water. Physical water may sustain our bodies, but we will still eventually die though we drink it. We can drink this and yet be thirsty again. But what if the well Jesus was referring to wasn't actual water but the spiritual waters from which she drank? The teachings and traditions of the first five books of the Bible known as the Pentateuch was all she had?

The water that Jesus offered was living water. The Greek word for "living" was *zao*. It means alive, lively, or quick. Living water moves, aerates, and is filtered from impurities as it rushes along. Jesus himself is the well that supersedes Jacob's Old Testament well. Through his words, Jesus refreshes, renews, and gives us life. Spiritual water sustains our souls which live forever. And my friends, once we drink this water, we will never thirst again.

Do you want this kind of living water? Jesus says, "Come to me and drink."

Notice how the deeper Jesus draws her into the waters of his word, the more she sees him for he truly was. At first he was just a man sitting by Jacob's well. Then he was a Jew. Then he was a prophet from God. And finally he was the Messiah.³

And the clearer she sees Jesus, the clearer she begins to see herself. The conversation gets too close for comfort so she backs away by highlighting the barriers that existed between Jews and Samaritans. Worship.

She said, "We worship at Mount Gerizim. But you say we should worship at the temple in Jerusalem."

But Jesus didn't fall for her distraction tactics. He destroyed her barriers, saying that place and formality is not important. What is important is the heart of the person worshipping. Jesus said, "God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and truth."

What does that mean?

Folks, the furthest distance that one can often travel is between the heart and the head. I think that what Jesus was getting at, was that true worship engages both. The heart meaning our emotions, and not just going through the motions. Heart felt, spirit-filled worship is sincere. It is motivated out of gratitude for God's goodness and is infused with faith, commitment, and zeal. Spirit-filled worship makes us feel alive...connected to the heart of Jesus.

³ George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary, John Second Edition* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1999), 66.

Mindful worship, however, is theologically accurate. It is informed by who God is and what God is like which means that it is based off the words and life of Jesus as revealed to us through the Bible.

And Jesus says, God desires both/and.

So what then is Jesus saying to us today?

I keep coming back to the idea that we can't worship God if our hearts aren't in the right place. That's why we give opportunity to confess our sins each week in worship. The clearer this woman saw Jesus, the clearer she began to see herself. In the same way, the clearer we see Jesus, the clearer we begin to see ourselves.

Just as Jesus took his disciples and this woman through territory they'd rather avoid, so I believe Jesus is inviting us down similar roads.

Lets get right to the heart.

In today's day and age, it is so easy to get caught up into this us verses them mentality. In some settings it is much easier for me to avoid certain people or groups of people. More specifically, let's ask "Who do we despise today? Who do we hate? Who do we wish would go away?" What if Jesus were saying, "I know you'd rather avoid talking about this person, but guess what...we are going there. I want heal you completely so that you can worship me in spirit and in truth."

Jesus told his disciples, "You have heard it said long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to their brother or sister, 'You empty headed,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift."⁴

Folks, we can't hide from Jesus. Jesus knew Nathanael's heart. He knew Nicodemus' heart. He knew the Samaritan woman's heart. He knew his disciples' hearts. And he knows our hearts as well. He knows our minds. He knows our hurts, our disappointments, and our feelings. Jesus knows it all.

But he calls us to take those first steps to reconcile our broken relationships while we still have the chance. Jesus wants to set us free. He wants to give us healing water. He wants us to worship again in spirit and in truth.

Will we come to the fountain and drink water that will well up within us to eternal life?

Jesus says, "Come, drink, and thirst no more."

Amen.

⁴ Matthew 5:21-24