

A sermon prepared for March 8, 2026, the Third Sunday in Lent

There was a woman at the well...Worse yet, an unmarried Samaritan woman! Say it isn't so! How can Jesus get involved in such a travesty? What a scandal!

Our Gospel lesson this morning is the longest recorded, and most evenly balanced, dialogue between Jesus and another person in the Bible.

Think about it...the longest and most equitably balanced conversation occurs between Jesus and an unmarried Samaritan woman at the well!

Not with a disciple, a family member, a faith leader, or even an accuser or persecutor...but with a Samaritan woman at a well in the middle of the day.

This conversation, and the scene in which it occurs, is highly unusual.

Have you ever prejudged or changed your interaction with someone based solely upon their reputation or appearance? I hope you all said yes. Whether we are willing to acknowledge it or not, the truth is, that we all struggle with our own implicit biases rooted in age, gender or gender identity, ethnicity, skin color, citizenship or economic status, the uniform or clothing worn, hygiene, ability...I'm sure the list goes on.

Our unconscious prejudices and stereotypes create boundaries that we use as shortcuts to process how we perceive others and how we interact with the world about us.

To be fair, some of what we do is probably rooted in our survival instincts. Think about it, many of us easily snuggle with a cat, yet wouldn't feel comfortable closed in a cage with a tiger. Our survival instincts are deeply rooted in our psyche, much like the ancestral heritage and teachings passed down through generations of tradition, history, and sometimes, misinformation or misuse of power.

In our human interactions with one another, these stereotypes and boundaries often create barriers to community, and increase divisions, conflict, and violence that allows for ongoing discrimination, oppression, and dehumanization of people who are not like "us" — whoever "they" may be. Before we know it, we have lost touch with compassion and kindness towards groups of people.

Returning to this conversation between a Jew and a Samaritan...

On his way from Judea to Galilee, Jesus takes the most direct route, which leads him through Samaria. Even though Jews and Samaritans were both descendants from ancient Israel and practiced similar

religions, there was a long-standing hostility between them. This hostility was rooted in immigration, intermarriage between those immigrants and remnants of the lost ten tribes of Israel, and a Persian political advantage to keep the hostility alive between these two groups of people.

Did you catch that?

The long-standing hostility was rooted in issues of immigration, intermarriage between the foreigners and the natives, and an outsider who benefited politically from keeping the hostility alive.

Isn't it fascinating how a deep dive into history can reveal the perpetual fragility of our shared, common humanity? We've been doing this stuff to each other for eons!

As noted in our collect of the day: "we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves."

And, there is more...

Another very interesting feature of this unusual interaction is revealed in the woman's response to Jesus' request for water, "How is that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

In the context of time and place, it was highly unusual for a man to engage a woman in conversation, much less share things in common.

And, there's more! There is another deeper layer of scandal and controversy...Perhaps the most controversial element of this conversation is the place in which it occurs. You see, there is a biblical precedent eluded to in the setting for this scene. According to *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Volume 3* (Abingdon Press, 2008, p180), "The setting at a well in John 4 evokes the betrothal scenes of Isaac's servant and Rebekah (Gen 24:10-61), Jacob and Rachel (Ben 29:1-30), and Moses and Zipporah (Exod 2:15-22). In each case, a man experiences conflict, travels to a foreign country, meets a woman at a well, and they have a conversation about water; she tells her people about him; they marry and celebrate a meal..."

No wonder the disciples were shocked when they returned from the grocery store!

Now, I'm not suggesting that Jesus went on to marry this woman from Samaria. What I am saying is that, once again, Jesus shatters the foundation of our human expectation, the construct of our man-made boundaries and assumptions, and forces us to question what we think we know others; what we think we know about how we should behave; and what we think we know about how we should interact with one another.

Doing things the way “we’ve always done it” isn’t always what God calls us to do. This conversation — again the longest one recorded between Jesus and another person in the Bible— shatters our misconceptions.

Moreover, in this conversation, Jesus calls us to remember what is most important: the gift of life — the living water — is given to us by God, alone.

Returning again to our collect: “We have no power in ourselves to help ourselves.” Not in our bodies, which are prone to adversities and failures, or in our minds, where evil thoughts may assault and hurt the soul.

“We have no power in ourselves to help ourselves.”

In today’s conversation, Jesus says, “true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.”

My friends, on this third Sunday in Lent, I invite us all to consider how often we worship things other than the Father in spirit in truth: things like our bodies, our accumulation of wealth, our intelligence, our emotions, our instincts, our stereotypes, our talents, our skills, our ambitions and our accomplishments...

Worshipping all of these other things, makes us weary, worn, sad, and thirsty for more. I invite you to ponder all of these things, along with a quote from verse two of hymn #692 found in our Hymnal 1982: “I heard the voice of Jesus say, “Behold, I freely give the living water; thirsty one, stoop down and drink, and live.” ”

We have no power in ourselves to help ourselves...Thirsty ones — stoop down and drink, and live.

Amen.