

"Spirit and Truth"

A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr

First Presbyterian Church of New Canaan, CT – March 12, 2023

PLEASE READ:

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-30

Sometimes I welcome people to our worship with the words, “We hope you will be able to worship the Lord in spirit and in truth.” It comes from this passage: “God is spirit,” Jesus says, “and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth.” But what does worshipping God in spirit and truth really mean?

Last week we talked about Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews. He was a religious man coming to Jesus for answers by night. Jesus told him you must be born *from above* by water and spirit... Today we find Jesus talking with a Samaritan woman in the middle of the day, only this time Jesus begins by asking her for a drink...

The juxtaposition of these two stories is important. On the one hand we have a conformist Jewish man, on the other an independent Samaritan woman. One is a legalist, and the other is a libertarian. One has tried to find God through law and tradition, the other has tried to find fulfillment through “doing her own thing.”

I believe John puts these two encounters with Jesus together to help us understand that the gospel is neither about being religious or irreligious; it’s not about being legalistic or licentious; it’s not about being moral or immoral! The gospel is all about what God has done for us that we could not do for ourselves. It’s about receiving the gift of God, that we find our deepest meaning and worth when we live by grace *through faith*. I don’t know if today you are a long time Christian or just curious about Christianity, but one thing these texts make perfectly clear is *the gospel is for all of us*. You can miss the purpose of your life by doing bad, and you can miss the purpose of your life by doing good. You can miss the meaning of your life by being religious, and you can miss the meaning of your life by being irreligious.... Jesus offers another way, a *tertium quid*, a third thing, a new paradigm for us to receive new life for which we were created and to which we are called by God.

As we learned last week with Nicodemus, when Jesus is talking to people, they hear his words, but they don’t always understand what he’s really saying. Notice the encounter begins with Jesus saying to the woman, "Give me a drink." Maybe that surprises you. Maybe you thought God was self-sufficient, independent, not needing anything from us. It's a signal: Listen up. Your ideas about God are about to get rearranged.

It starts off about water, and that sounds simple enough, but of course water in the Jewish mind conjures up all kinds of theological and historical symbolism. Watery chaos covers the unformed land in Genesis, yet God moves over it effortlessly, in the form of a breath. The Spirit moves over the waters and brings forth all of creation. A genocidal flood devastates all creation, saving only a righteous few, killing all the wicked. But through the waters God leads the people out of slavery and into the Promised land. It is through the waters of baptism that we are all welcomed into the family of God, a kind of “death by drowning” but reborn into a life assured that we are beloved children of God, friends of God, members of the household of God. As broken as we may be, we are forgiven and made righteous, called saints and destined to share the weight of glory by grace through faith...

Jesus introduces the idea of "living water," suggesting that more is going on with this than just the water at the well...It's a play on words. In those days when one said, “living water,” it meant *running water*. It was stream water rather than water of a stagnant cistern. I have joked with our Elders when we prepare for a baptism, that we should use *cold* water. In the *didache*, the first century (pre-Constantinian) manual of how to “do church,” we read those to be baptized should be immersed in “living water.” I’ve seen archeological remains of an early church in Jordan where trenches were dug from a stream a half mile down the road all the way into the center of the sanctuary floor into a pool, so that living water could be used for baptism. The *didache* goes on to say that if you can’t use running water, then it must be cold! Cold water, is fresh, and more likely to wake us up!

The well of Jacob was actually not a spring well, but a well into which water seeped from the subsoil. Running, living water from a stream was better. The woman was really asking, "Where are you going to get fresh stream water?"

Her wooden literalism and antagonism is typical of how some people respond to Jesus' offer of new life. Jesus had to explain to Nicodemus what it meant to be *born again*. Here the woman is asking Jesus where he's going to find literal running water! She wants some too!

We think we have to get it right in order to please God, or if we don’t believe in God we strive to “get there,” however we define “there.” But the gospel is clear: The Good News is not about what you have to “get,” but what God has already given you in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Jesus responds with directness, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." In other words, Jesus is saying, “I have something for you that you can’t ever

get for yourself.” And whatever this may have meant to this woman, she knew she wanted it. "Sir, give me this water!" Like so many centuries of people who yearn for new life and hope, she wants whatever it is *now* - she wants to experience salvation, conversion, transformation, or new life *immediately*.

But rather than perform a magic trick, Jesus cuts to the deeper issues of her life, that which covered over the wellspring of living waters in her life...

Any of us who have been in therapy will recognize that often in the healing process, it gets worse before it gets better. I've talked with a number of you who have had recent surgeries, and at times, the cure hurts more than the injury. That's why so many people who struggle with addiction, or self-medication and attempts at avoiding the pain always struggle with the big D-word: *Denial*. Salvation sometime comes after a necessary plunge into the depths. Jesus makes the woman see the truth of her own life and how acknowledging truth, brokenness and the need for new life come before the ability to drink from the living waters...

By the time they are done discussing her various relationships, the woman is saying to herself: "I am a sinner before God; I must take that offering to the house of God to put myself right; where am I going to take it?" To her, and her contemporaries, the only cure for sin was sacrifice. Her great problem was: where was that sacrifice to be made? And this is where Jesus goes on to tell her about worshiping in spirit and in truth, and she becomes confused again. "When the Messiah comes, then I'll understand..."

And then Jesus says the most stunning thing: "*Ego emi*" "I am!" (which interestingly is the Greek translation of the same way God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush).

Worshipping in spirit and in truth has nothing to do with religion or rules, but everything to do with the Living God, and how we are invited by God into relationship through faith. I had a wonderful experience yesterday at the memorial service we had here for Pete Runnette. Pete had traveled all over the world, and so friends from all over the world were at the service. I met a woman from Iran at the reception, and we started talking. She was raised Muslim but now prefers not to be labeled. We talked about Zoroastrianism, the ancient religion of the region, and the connection we have with how the magi in the biblical narrative were most likely Zoroastrian priests. I noted that while they encountered the Christ child, the story tells us they went home by a different way, changed, but surely back to their culture and religious practices, perhaps more committed to showing God's love and seeking peace for all?

Worshipping in Spirit and in truth has nothing to do with “the right” place or procedures, but everything to do with people everywhere. It’s more about what’s going on in your heart than how you hold your hymnbook or even the words we say in our rituals of worship. It’s hardly about style, but about substance. We tend to think worshipping in spirit and in truth is about what we do in here (sanctuary), but I think Jesus is more concerned with how we love God...and love our neighbors out there. Remember, there are exactly 168 hours in a week. We only gather together for one of them for worship. Hopefully the worship we enjoy here for one hour transforms the worship we engage out there the other 167 hours!

It’s ironic that while Nicodemus, the religious man and leader of the Jews, eventually became a follower of Christ, this Samaritan outsider immediately invites the whole town, "Come and see... He can't be the Messiah, can he?" The Samaritans want him to stay, and many of them believed, saying, “we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.” What a contrast with the orthodox religious folks back in Jerusalem who want Jesus dead...

All the double-talk in this story - words which we think we know, but then we don't, people we think we have pegged, then discover we don't - was meant by John to warn us: *Expect the unexpected*. Be on guard when you go to draw water, for the well of life is deeper than you think. The Spirit blows where she will. Truth is more complex and mysterious than you imagine.

To know Jesus is not to know him completely! To know Jesus is to risk being known by him. Just so, living water is fresh, new, and unpredictable. Worshipping in spirit and in truth allows Jesus to intrude on all of our assumptions, and to well up in us fresh welcome and love for those different from us, even hated enemies...

So, brothers and sisters, siblings in Christ... As we meet today, as we go about our lives this week, as you go out to the well of your daily existence, may the Living Water of Jesus flood your heart. May God graciously fill you up so that you can pour out on others – even those who are different from you - the Living Waters of Christ’s grace and love...

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer! Amen.