

**NEW VISION UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**  
**1600 Mangrove Avenue, Suite 177**  
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**11:00 -- Sunday Celebration Worship**

**“A Long, Challenging Conversation”**

Preached by: Pastor Jim Peck

December 13, 2015

Note: The Bible reading and the message are interwoven.  
The Bible reading is in bold. The message is in plain.

Bible reading: John 4:1 - 30 and 39 - 42 New Revised Standard Version

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Will you pray with me? Holy God, may we know the light of your truth this morning as we open our hearts to your Word. Amen.  
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I'm going to do something this morning I don't often do when I offer a message. I'm going to weave the Bible reading from John 4 with the interpretation and reflection on it. You'll probably be able to tell from my tone of voice or the words themselves when I'm reading the Bible and when I'm reflecting on it. This is a great story from John 4, one we should all know. There's just so much in it, I thought this method might work better at opening it up to us.

Here's how John sets the scene.

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John” <sup>2</sup>—although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— <sup>3</sup> he left Judea and started back to Galilee. <sup>4</sup> But he had to go through Samaria. <sup>5</sup> So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup> Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

<sup>7</sup> A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” <sup>8</sup> (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

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This introduction tells us something important about Jesus. He got tired. He got hungry. He got thirsty. It also tells us he was a pragmatic person. As his popularity has increased, the Pharisees - who felt they should be the only popular kids - took notice. These are the people who feared Jesus. So, being pragmatic about these things, he decided to leave the province of Judea, near Jerusalem, and head north to Capernaum in the province of Galilee, which was his home base.

The shortest route to Galilee went through the province of Samaria. John says this specifically. Generally, Jews avoided going through Samaria, and if they had to go through

Samaria, they went as quickly as possible. I'll say more about that in a minute. There were other routes from Judea to Galilee, longer routes, but the shortest route went through Samaria. It would be like going from Chico to Salt Lake City without going through Nevada. Or Chico to Redding without going through Red Bluff. You can do it, but it will take longer.

Even today, modern Israel does not include the area that was Samaria. It is part of the occupied Palestinian territories of the West Bank, near or in what is now the city of Nablus. The traditional location of Jacob's well is within an Eastern Orthodox monastery on the east side of Nablus. Jerusalem and Capernaum are both in modern Israel. I checked the distance from Jerusalem to Capernaum. The shortest route is 85 miles - about the distance from here to Sacramento - through the West Bank territories. But the recommended route on Google maps is entirely within modern Israel, and is 185 miles.

When they got to Sychar, they took a break. Jacob's well must have been outside the city walls. Jesus rested there while the disciples went into town to get food. It is noon. Customarily, you would come to the well early in the day to get water for the day. We don't know why the woman came at noon, and I think we should not speculate about it. She needed water at noon and came to get it.

Jesus spoke to her, asking for a drink of water. Like women of every era and culture, she must have been uneasy about a man she did not know speaking to her at a place away from the city when there is no one else around. Further, a Jewish man did not initiate conversation with an unknown woman. Further, a Jewish teacher did not engage in public conversation with a woman. Jesus breaks these social conventions.

His action is far more shocking to the first readers of this story than it is to us. We live in a culture where any man will strike up a conversation with any woman at any time. Some of my women friends secretly long for the good old days of being left alone, I'm sure!

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**<sup>9</sup> The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)**

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Speaking to an unknown woman in public is only the first layer of social convention being broken. Far more serious is the ethnic barrier being broken by Jesus. "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans" as the New Revised translation puts it is an understatement. Jews reviled Samaritans, considered them unclean, and more than that, considered them less than human. This enmity had lasted for hundreds of years and was severe.

Jews interacted with Samaritans as little as possible. The disciples in the city looking for food were, I am sure, as uneasy about being there as the folks in the city were about seeing twelve Jewish men in a gang wandering the streets. What could they be up to? It must be no good. Sell them some food and do it quickly, so they can leave quickly, and we can stop being anxious. The disciples, being Jews, part of the dominant group in the region, were confident no one would harm them. But they surely knew the resentment Samaritans felt towards Jews.

It's now been over thirty years ago. I had to buy some candles for a worship service at the church in Atlanta where I was a member. I made an intentional decision to go to a shopping center in a predominantly African-American neighborhood. I saw in the yellow pages there was a candle shop there that specialized, it said, in candles for religious purposes.

Atlanta is my city, all of it, and no one was going to tell me I couldn't go anywhere I wanted. And being white, and being a shopper with money, I was confident no harm would come to me.

I was the only customer in the shop. Yet, three African-American male staffers, I think the entire staff, came out from the back to assist me. They seemed tense. I told them what I needed. One man helped me select some long-burning candles he felt would be right for my needs. I paid. I thanked him. I left. When I got to my car, I laughed out loud about how tense they seemed, when, really, it was not necessary. I was not there to do them harm.

It did not dawn on me until earlier this year, more than thirty years later, why they were tense: the only reason a white man would come to their shop was if he was a police officer! Of course they were tense. I thought I was courageously overcoming a racial barrier - white people don't go to that shopping center - and I was. But I did not perceive until very recently how those shopkeepers interpreted me - must be a cop. That's why all three of them kept an eye on me.

The woman knows the rules, and attempts to remind Jesus of them. But he persists, and the two of them have the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone in the entire Gospel of John.

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**<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." <sup>11</sup> The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? <sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" <sup>13</sup> Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup> but those who drink of 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." <sup>15</sup> The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."**

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Properly, the woman should have gone back to town immediately, but she did not. Maybe she was in a rule-breaking mood, maybe there was something about Jesus that interested her, maybe she'd just never talked to a Jewish man before and wondered what it was like. At any rate, Jesus rather quickly moves to a more serious topic than needing a drink of water.

The term "living water" can literally mean a spring or brook or fountain. Here, Jesus is using it as a metaphor for our relationship to God. He says he can provide living water, water that is endlessly refreshing, water that gushes with renewal. She interprets it literally - how nice it would be to not have to make the trek to the well!

He keeps telling her it's not that kind of water. Living water is God alive in us. And the man asking her for a drink is the one who gives this living water. At this point, he has forgotten he is thirsty and she has realized how deeply parched she is. It's very easy to lose touch with how parched we are, to accept dried up as the normal state of our inner lives. That appears to have happened to her, and she's beginning to feel it, but she's not quite convinced he knows what he's talking about.

Then he says something that convinces her.

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**<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."<sup>17</sup> The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; <sup>18</sup> for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"**

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Jesus tells her the truth about her own life. He tells her she is alone, and it's been a hard life for her, and no wonder she is turning to dust on the inside.

Jesus does that. He tells us the truth about our own lives, how we never quite meet even our own expectations, but God never gives up hope in us. How we never quite keep all our promises, but God never loses faith in us. How we never quite love our neighbors and especially not our enemies, but God never stops loving us. Jesus does that. He tells us that the truth about God is a more powerful truth than the truth about us.

Please note this: Jesus spends not a word condemning this woman for whatever has happened with her relationships with men. Not. A. Word. Doesn't ask for an explanation. Doesn't pass judgment. That's not his purpose. His purpose is not to review the past with her. His purpose is to invite her into a relationship with God that will carry her into the future.

And now she's starting to get what is going on.

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**<sup>19</sup> The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup> Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.<sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." <sup>25</sup> The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."<sup>26</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."**

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"I see that you are a prophet. So let's talk about one of the many tensions between Samaritans and Jews: the proper place to worship God. Is it Mt. Gerazim, where we worship, or is it Jerusalem, where your people worship?" We could easily interpret this as yet another

attempt to distract Jesus away from talking about her. On the other hand, this is a serious question - what is the proper way to worship God -- and worthy of discussion.

Jesus doesn't take the bait. His answer is: doesn't matter. God is spirit, not place, and can be worshipped anywhere. Even here by the well.

Then she asserts the Samaritan's hope that the Messiah, the Promised One, is coming. Jesus says: "I am he. Hello."

Jesus in John's gospel seems more certain of his identity as the Messiah than he does in the other three gospels. He makes more "I Am" statements in John than in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Notice, though, in this conversation, that he waits until she has expressed her hope in the coming one before he says "I am that One."

Maybe it would have been easier to have started with "Hello. I'm the Messiah. Give me a drink of water." Instead, he engages a conversation that allows her to speak about her own heart and mind and hope and hurts. When he is sure her heart is open to what God can do, that is when he reveals himself as the Promised One. The timing matters, and God is incredibly patient with our stumbling.

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**27 Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" 28 Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 29 "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" 30 They left the city and were on their way to him.**

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The disciples come back and are astonished that he was speaking to a woman! I imagine they stopped some distance away and said to each other "What is she up to?" But they said nothing, having spent enough time with him to have learned astonishing things happen when Jesus is around.

The little detail that she left her water jar is important. One does not leave one's water jar! It is too precious to leave behind. But she is too excited, too joyful, too eager to tell people who she met at the well. What's a water jar when you have just begun to feel the gurgling of living water in your heart?

Because of what she said to them, her neighbors came to see for themselves. "He told me everything I have ever done," she said to them. He told me the truth about myself. Is this the one we have been waiting for?" And they must have been waiting eagerly, hopefully, because they did not shrug off the possibility. They came to meet him. They prevailed upon him to stay with them for two days. Thirteen Jewish men spending two days in a Samaritan city. The disciples must have loved that! In those two days, many of the Samaritans came to believe Jesus was the Savior they had been waiting for.

I think the disciples, Jews who hated the Samaritans as any good Jew was supposed to, changed too. Two days is a long time to spend with people you have been told to hate. Long enough to give up some stereotypes. Long enough to set aside some prejudices. Long enough to find out Samaritans love their children, too. Long enough to make some friends. Long

enough to unplug a stopped up spring in your own heart and come a little closer to loving your neighbor as God expects you to. The text doesn't say that, but I think that's what happened.

Following Jesus nearly always takes you places you didn't plan to visit, to meet people you didn't plan to meet.

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<sup>39</sup> Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done."<sup>40</sup> So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. <sup>41</sup> And many more believed because of his word. <sup>42</sup> They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Amen

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