

“Belonging”

John 4:4-42

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Prayer for Understanding God of abundance, help us be hungry for your good word and thirsty for your living water. Startle us with your grace. Amen.

Jesus models how to have conversations with people who have different perspectives. Having conversations, even with close friends and family, is often challenging today because of vastly different perspectives of what happened and how we should change to become a more loving world. We are tempted to avoid certain topics, disengage and distance ourselves from each other.

Today we celebrate that we belong to God and each other. We celebrate God's grace that adopts us. Celebrating our own forgiveness helps us forgive others. Celebrating our belonging to God and each other gives us the courage to keep loving, to stay engaged, to have challenging conversations, to change, to love. Brene Brown said, “Courage is listening, learning, unlearning. Courage is honoring stories that are different than our own. Only when diverse perspectives are included, respected and valued can we start to get a full picture of the world. Inclusion of all people, all opinions and all perspectives makes us all better.”

Jesus loves, listens and cares for everyone. Jesus taught, proclaimed and modeled that each of us belongs to God's family. In today's scripture Jesus breaks down barriers of gender, religion, privilege and ethnicity to transform a woman, affirming her identity as a beloved child of God. Water is a symbol of God's sustaining grace. Thirst is a metaphor for a yearning for God's grace to unite us all together in harmonious love.

John 4:4-42 NRSV “Jesus had to go through Samaria. So, Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to Jesus, “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.) 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.” The woman said to Jesus, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 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.” The woman said to Jesus, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman answered Jesus, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” The woman said to Jesus, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship God neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship God in spirit and truth, for God seeks such as these to worship. God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to Jesus, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” Just then Jesus' 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?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the

city and were on their way to Jesus. Meanwhile the disciples were urging Jesus, "Rabbi, eat something." But Jesus said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So, the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of God who sent me and to complete God's work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." Many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. 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."

All of us, whether we realize it or not, have a deep thirst for God's living water, God's transforming, uniting grace. Jesus and the disciples were traveling from Judea in the south back home to Galilee in the north. It was a long journey. "He had to go through Samaria," scripture says. But if you look at a map, you will notice that the most direct route from Judea to Galilee doesn't go through Samaria at all. It's out of the way. If you have to go to Samaria, it's because you have business there, something you want to do, someone you want to see. So, they take a side road and after walking for hours, unnecessary hours, some of them are complaining. They arrive at a well. It's midday. It's hot. They are hungry and thirsty. So, the disciples go to the closest town to buy some food. As Jesus sits by the well a woman approaches. This makes a first-century Jewish reader highly uncomfortable. In the first place, she is a Samaritan, and for 700 years there had been a festering and deep and hostile division between the Jews and Samaritans. It has to do with which temple was the real one and whose laws were the real thing, who was pure and who was impure, whose perspective was right. Jews and Samaritans had nothing to with each other, had pretty much excommunicated each other for they were both certain that they followed the one true faith. For centuries they fumed, replayed grievance in their mind, fabricating slights that were never intended, cultivated a deep and profound racial, religious and personal hatred. Normally Jews on the way from Judea to Galilee would have gone out of their way to avoid Samaria, not intentionally traveled there. So here Jesus is, a young Jewish rabbi, sitting at a well in Samaria, and Jesus sees a Samaritan coming toward him. It is time for him to get up and move a hundred feet away to avoid a confrontation that is going to be uncomfortable, unacceptable and illegal. It will render Jesus impure. Furthermore, it's a woman. The law is clear that males, particularly rabbis, are not to have anything to do with women in public. It's time for Jesus to get out of there. Instead Jesus does the most astonishing thing, shocking: Jesus asks her for a drink of water. She objects. "You know better than that. You're not supposed to have anything to do with me," she says. Jesus offers 'living water.'" We all thirst for God's living water of transforming uniting grace that reveals that we belong to God and each other.

The Samaritan women had a deep thirst for love and belonging. She has been through five divorces. One perspective is this woman is to blame for her failed marriages. Another perspective is she is the victim of oppression by male privilege. In first century Palestine a woman could not divorce her husband, nor could a woman ask for a man to marry her. Five husbands divorced her. In those days, a woman could not own property, run a business or labor without a connection to a man so she is left in poverty, struggling to survive. She has no belonging. Jesus compassionately names her struggle to survive and belong in a male dominated society. There are numerous other perspectives on this situation.

Their conversation continues. She is not intimidated by a man. They have a deep conversation about worship revealing this woman's tenacity. To have this conversation reveals that she was well educated. Women were not educated in those days. So, must have been self-educated. Women had restricted access to scripture. The conversation reveals that she had not only knowledge about Samaritan religion but also Jewish religion as well. She had to overcome numerous barriers to be able to have acquired this education. In addition, she was wise to be able to sort through all her memorized information to have a conversation about worship with Jesus.

The account that precedes this account is Nicodemus, a highly educated, respected male rabbi coming to Jesus at night signifying his limited spiritual sight for he was struggling to see that God loves the world, that

everyone belongs equally to God's family. The Samaritan woman meets Jesus at noon signifying her spiritual sight for she embraces the truth that God loves everyone, that all people belong to God.

The Samaritan woman drank deep of God's compassionate, gracious love that transforms and embraces everyone. In the gospel of John, she is the first person to recognize Jesus as the messiah and proclaim Jesus is the Savior of the world. Consistent with her life of courageous tenacity she effectively shares this good news with everyone becoming the first evangelist.

Jesus' disciples arrive with lunch and they are horrified. "What are you doing?" they ask. "Why are you speaking with her?" It was a great lesson they learned from Jesus. Suddenly they understood that when Jesus taught, "God so loved the world" There are no exceptions. We all belong to God's gracious, peaceful, joyful family. Being known and loved quenches our spiritual thirst. Jesus came not to exclude rather to include, not to judge, rather redeem, not to condemn, rather to save.

The woman becomes the first evangelist. "Many Samaritans believed." And the people of that village, those radical outcast and religious heretics, invited Jesus' band of 12 politically correct, morally pure, and theologically orthodox Jews to do the unthinkable: to stay with them. And they accepted. Suddenly Jesus disciples began living what they just learned, we all belong to God and each other, therefore we are called to listen to each other, eat together, spend time together, learn from each other, love each other. They were ancient enemies, people who believed in the depths of their hearts that the others were so wrong, that other religions were nonsense, that the way others lived was impure, immoral, corrupt, wicked, that contact with them was repugnant, unthinkable—those people spent two days together. They listened to each other. They had empathy for each other. They ate together. They shared dishes and utensils and cups. They slept under the same roof. Perhaps they had a party. Perhaps they had a banquet and drank wine—men and women, Jews and Samaritans. They viewed each other, each perspective as equal. Before Jesus and the disciples left, they embraced.

Jesus had to go through Samaria to show the woman, Samaritans, all outcasts, that they are loved and belong to God's family. Jesus eliminated traditional certainties, boundaries, barriers and walls. Jesus had to go through Samaria to show the disciples and us, that we are to lovingly have tough conversations, to listen, to learn, to work, together, with everyone, to find shared solutions.

Individually and together we are to resist temptations to not listen, to be silent, to disengage, to dehumanize. Resist temptations to talk and not listen. Resist temptations to blame and shame. Resist temptations to dismiss another's feelings. Resist temptations to exclude, to debate who is in and who is out, to compare whose lifestyle is better. Resist temptations to silence and ignore the stories of others. Self-certainty is blindness and destructive. Resist temptations to declare our own religion as superior. Religious certitude is toxic.

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Today we celebrate that we belong to each other and God. We celebrate God's grace that adopts us. Celebrating our belonging to God and each other gives us the courage to keep loving, to stay engaged, to have challenging conversations, to change, to love.

Today we celebrate our calling to be like the disciples willing to follow Jesus into challenging conversations, to learn, to see fresh perspectives, to love people who have extremely different perspectives and radical solutions, to love all people. Today we celebrate that we are called to be like the woman courageous and tenacious in sharing God's love with everyone. Amen

